

**THE TANTRIC TURN IN BUDDHISM: EXPLORING
ITS ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT IN EARLY
MEDIEVAL BENGAL (6TH – 12TH CENTURIES CE)**

By

Ritwik Bagchi

Registration Number: AOOHI1100318

Date of Registration: 18/09/2018

Supervisor:

Professor Nupur Dasgupta

Department of History

Jadavpur University

Thesis submitted to the Department of History, Jadavpur University for the
degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Arts

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Certified that the Thesis entitled

‘THE TANTRIC TURN IN BUDDHISM: EXPLORING ITS ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT IN EARLY MEDIEVAL BENGAL (6TH – 12TH CENTURIES CE)’

submitted by me for the award of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Arts at Jadavpur University is based upon my work carried out under the Supervision of Professor Nupur Dasgupta and that neither this thesis nor any part of it has been submitted before any degree or diploma anywhere/ elsewhere.

Countersigned by the

Candidate:

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DECLARATION

I do hereby declare that the research work entitled ‘THE TANTRIC TURN IN BUDDHISM: EXPLORING ITS ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT IN EARLY MEDIEVAL BENGAL (6TH – 12TH CENTURIES CE)’ is an original work done by me under the supervision of Prof. Nupur Dasgupta, Jadavpur University which was approved by the research committee.

To the best of my knowledge, this thesis is not substantially the same as those, which have already been submitted for a degree or other academic qualification at any other universities.

Date:

(RITWIK BAGCHI)

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Introduction

The present research aims to understand the processes and features of certain aspects of Buddhism often termed tantric in the context of early medieval Bengal and its adjacent regions which we have named – ‘greater Bengal’ for convenience of identification of the cultural space that forms the spatial context of this research. The term greater Bengal is applied to the region starting slightly west of the Rajmahal Hills in the west up to the old alluvial plains of Barind, and Lalmai Hills and the new alluvial plain of the Ganga-Brahmaputra-Meghna system in the east. The study focuses on the region of greater Bengal as it was arguably a stronghold of Buddhism in the Indian sub-continent before the medieval times. It is against this spatial and historical background that we attempt to note the efflorescence of what has been identified as the tantric orientation within Buddhism and try to trace its roots and understand its nature and culmination. The religion had undergone certain significant processes of change in its ideational and ritual practices particularly from the 7th century CE onward and had experienced certain new developments in the religious landscape. These developments were characterized by the rise of distinct ritual, esoteric and mystical practices which lent distinctive characteristics not only to Buddhism but also to several other Brahmanical religious orders. This was a characteristic trend that had set in early medieval India in general and was conspicuously manifest within various sects of Śaivism, Śāktism, and Vaiṣṇavism.

The existence of tantric Buddhism especially in the context of early medieval Bengal has often been uncritically accepted without analysing and historicizing the tangible evidence. This research proposes to address the problem by exploring the varied representations in texts, images, paintings, and field evidence of early medieval greater Bengal and situate the phenomenon within its historical premises. The area of our study is greater Bengal, consisting of south - eastern parts of Bihar, modern West Bengal, and Bangladesh. Buddhism originating in Magadha made its way into northern Bengal (Puṇḍravardhana) and Tāmralipta during the Mauryan period in the 3rd century BCE.¹ Centres of Buddhism have been mentioned in the accounts of Faxian² in the 5th century CE and later in the 7th century CE accounts of the Chinese

¹ The fact is supported by the Mahasthangarh Fragmentary Inscription and the *Divyāvadāna*. For details see, B.M. Barua, “The Old Brāhmī Inscription of Mahasthan,” *Indian Historical Quarterly*, Vol. X, 1934, pp. 57-58. E.B. Cowell and R.E. Neil (tr.), *The Divyāvadāna*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1886, p. 427.

² Li Ronxi, “The Journey of the Eminent Monk Faxian,” *Lives of Great Monks and Nuns*, Barkley: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, 2002, pp. 157-163.

pilgrims, Xuanzang³ and Yijing.⁴ In the early medieval period, the Buddhist monastical centres like Nālandā and Vikramśīla were well connected to the Harikela (Chittagong) and Arakan through a corridor which facilitated the exchange of Buddhist sacred ideas. Under the Pāla reign from 8th century CE onwards the regions of South Bihar and Northern Bengal came under a common political unit. Thus, a common cultural space had emerged with shared features throughout the present-day south Bihar, West Bengal, and Bangladesh for which we have applied the term ‘greater Bengal’ (to be used henceforth).⁵ The early medieval stone and metal sculptures, paintings, inscriptions (Siddhamātrka script) of south Bihar showed striking similarity in terms of artistic style, medium and scribing style with those located in West Bengal and Bangladesh. Therefore, these regions were probably functioning as a somewhat large cultural corridor in early medieval times. Our discussion of tantric Buddhism covers the evidence located in this cultural region.

Bengal formed an eastern frontier region in the Buddhist geography in the early period. The Buddhist Majjhimadeśa which extended up to the Kajangal or Rajmahal mountain according to the Pāli Vinaya Pitaka, had extended up to the sub-region of Puṇḍravardhana or northern Bengal in the Avadāna text *Divyāvadāna*.⁶ Evidence from early historic and classical times linking this eastern frontier to the Buddhist circuit have been found in literary and epigraphic sources. The *Divyāvadāna* carried a legend that described the incident of Aśoka having massacred 18,000 Ājīvikas of Puṇḍravardhana for downgrading the Buddha in a painting. Sporadic mention of Buddhism in the same region during the post-Aśokan period might be found from the two votive inscriptions of Sanchi, recording gifts by two inhabitants from Puṇḍravardhana.⁷ In the Gupta period we come across evidence for land grants made to the Mahāyāna congregation of Avaivarttika located in the Southeastern Samatāṭa region during the reign of Vaiṣyagupta (507 CE). The presence of the Avaivarttika sect was not only confined to the Southeastern Bengal, but was known also from the Jagajjibanpur Copperplate of

³ Samuel Beal (tr. and ed.), *Su-Yu-Ki: Buddhist Record of the Western World Translated from the Chinese of Hiuen Tsang*, Vol. II, Delhi: Orient Books Reprint Corporation [1884], 1968, p. 195.

⁴ J. Takakusu (tr. and ed.), *A Record of the Buddhist Religion as Practiced in India and Malay Archipelago (AD 671-695)*, Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1966, p. xxx.

⁵ Henceforth, wherever the phrase ‘early medieval Bengal’ has been used, we have actually implied this notion of greater Bengal.

⁶ B.C. Law, *Geography of Early Buddhism*, London: Kegan Paul, 1932, pp. 28-29.

⁷ E.B. Cowell and R.E. Neil, *The Divyāvadāna*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1886, p. 427.

Mahendrapāla from 9th century CE in the Northern Bengal.⁸ Faxian's record of the Mi-li-kia-si-kia-po-no or Mṛgasthāpana vihāra in Varendra built by Śrīgupta provide further evidence regarding the presence of Buddhism in northern Bengal.⁹

Buddhism in greater Bengal during the 7th century CE showed significant trends of Mahāyāna Buddhism as recorded by Chinese travelogues of Xuanzang and Yijing. The detailed recording of the Buddhist saṅghārāmas and their monastic culture left by Xuanzang proves without doubt that Buddhist vihāras conformed to the Mahāyāna norms. The travelogues of Yijing and Sheng-chi also attest to the fact that the Vinaya norms were considered to be sacred and was followed in the monastic complexes in these regions. However, this is also the same period when Buddhist texts like *Guhyasamāja tantra* (6th century CE) and *Āryamañjuśrīmūlakalpa* (7th century CE) were composed with a radically different set of ideas and practices with possible eastern Indian connection. In the *Guhyasamāja tantra*, the five transcendental Buddhas were epitomized as the guardians of five *skandhas* and their female consorts were introduced.¹⁰ In the *Āryamañjuśrīmūlakalpa* we come across several complex mantra, abhiṣeka and maṇḍala practices which were not compatible with the traditional Mahāyāna monastic culture.¹¹ Imprint of these ideas and practices, commonly regarded as Tantric, was gradually making its presence in the contemporary Buddhist pantheon and material culture. In the present research we shall make an attempt to enquire into the origin and development of these processes.

Objective and Scope of Research

The present research seeks to comprehensively define the characteristic trends of tantric Buddhism in early medieval greater Bengal. The main thrust of the research is on reading a few early medieval Buddhist texts which can be situated in Bengal and eastern India and which qualify as the major sources for understanding the ritual and ideological scope of Tantra in Buddhism of this context. The principal focus will be on tracing the origin and progression of tantric Buddhism and understanding its various manifestations in the specific regional context from the 6th – 12th centuries CE. We shall enquire about the way certain esoteric trends became

⁸ For details about the avaiarttika sect see, James B. Apple, "The Irreversible Bodhisattva (avaivartika) in the Lotus *Sūtra* and *Avaivartikacakrasūtra*," pp. 59-80.

⁹ Li Ronxi, "The Journey of the Eminent Monk Faxian," *Lives of Great Monks and Nuns*, Barkley: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, 2002, p. 175.

¹⁰ Benoytosh Bhattacharyya (ed), *Guhyasamāja Tantra or Tathāgataguhyaka*, Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1967, pp. xiv-xv.

¹¹ T. Ganapati Sastri (ed), *The Āryamañjuśrīmūlakalpa*, Trivandrum: The Superintendent Government Press, 1920 (in three volumes).

apparent in Buddhism, and were adopted and absorbed within the Mahāyāna practices. The emergence of tantric Buddhism cannot be seen as an isolated phenomenon, but has to be observed in the context of the select region's connections with China, Nepal, Tibet and Southeast Asia.¹² The evidence leads us to ponder on whether the development of tantric Buddhism was a result of Bengal's geographical location in a cultural crossroads that paved the way for interactions with Southeast Asia, Tibet, and sub-Himalayan regions.

The principal Buddhist sites in the early historic Bengal were located in Pundravardhana and Tāmralipti which facilitated the overseas exchange with Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia from 3rd century BCE. Faxian also landed in Tāmralipti from China in 5th century CE. From the 6th century onwards, several other places rose to prominence as sacred Buddhist sites. The footprint of tantric Buddhism in Bengal may be traced out in the light of a few sacred places (pīṭha) of tantric Buddhism mentioned in the *Hevajratāntra* (8th century CE) referring to the sub-regions of early medieval Bengal like Harikela, and Devikot (Bangarh).¹³ Tantric Buddhism's connection with eastern India may be pointed out, as many of the sacred sites were also located in the eastern India like Purnagiri (modern Purnea in Bihar), Kāmarūpa (Assam), Kalinga (Odisha) and Nagara (identified as Pāṭaliputra). The twenty-four holy sites mentioned in the *Cakrasamvaratantra* (8th century CE) indicate that tantric Buddhism was practiced in a wide connected regions covering South, Southeast and Central Asia. Bengal was an integral part of it.¹⁴ The places of composition of tantric Buddhist texts like the *Cakrasamvaratantra* and the *Hevajratāntra* are difficult to determine as they were composed anonymously and over a long time-period. The *Hevajratāntra* was described as a divine text ascribing apriori creation but it was stated to have been revealed to the eastern Indian siddhācārya Saraha.¹⁵ Thus one may assume an eastern Indian connection. The extensive commentarial literature of the *Cakrasamvaratantra* were composed by the Buddhist masters of Bengal like Lui pā and Atīśa.¹⁶ Many of the eighty-four tantric siddhas like Nāro pā, Tilo pā

¹² The geography of the Buddhist pilgrimage across Asia has been shown by Robert H. Stoddard, "The Geography of Buddhist Pilgrimage in Asia", in Adriana Proser (ed), *Pilgrimage and Buddhist Art*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010, pp. 2-4.

¹³ David Snellgrove (tr.), *The Hevajra Tantra: A Critical Study*, London: Oxford University Press, 1959, p. 70.

¹⁴ Tsunehiko Sugiki, "Book Review: David B. Grey, *The Cakrasamvara Tantra (The Discourse of Sri Heruka): A Study and Annotated Translation*," *Journal of International Association of Buddhist Studies*, Vol. 31, No. 1, 2008, pp. 527-529.

¹⁵ David Snellgrove, *The Hevajra Tantra: A Critical Study*, p. 12

¹⁶ David B. Grey (tr.), *The Cakrasamvara Tantra (The Discourse of Sri Heruka): A Study and Annotated Translation*, New York: The American Institute of Buddhist Studies, 2007, p. 124.

and Kāṇha pā, who wrote commentaries of these texts, were active in the Buddhist academia of early medieval Bengal.¹⁷ The extensive exegetical and commentarial literature of the tantric Buddhist texts were evidently connected to the academic community of eastern Indian Buddhist monasteries like Nālandā, Vikramśīla, Sompura, Jagaddala etc.

The rise of the tantric sacred places in early medieval Bengal and eastern India was not an isolated historical event. This was also the time when Bengal developed a deep-rooted inter-regional connection with China, Tibet, South-east Asian world and the long-stretch of the Himalayan - sub-Himalayan belt. In fact, esoteric Buddhism was believed to have first appeared in China with a different character from India much before 8th century CE.¹⁸ Chinese esoteric Buddhism, as a few recent studies have revealed, was a product of the ritual magic and performative strategies embedded in the early Mahāyāna sutras like the *Prajñāpāramitā* (1st century BCE).¹⁹ Buddhism in China emerged with close ties with the Northwestern part of the Indian subcontinent. After the collapse of the Xiongnu Confederation in 55 BCE, the Han empire expanded in the Pamir region leading to the escalation of interactions between Han China and northern India. The dynastic history of *Hou Han Shu* during the second century CE sheds light on the culture of the Gāndhāra region and the transmission of Buddhism and associated culture in China.²⁰ The Bamiyan Valley in the Hindukush area of central Afghanistan was acting as a juncture between the Uttarāpatha (northern route) and the ancient road in central Asia.²¹ From the middle of the second century CE dozens of Buddhist texts began to be translated into Chinese. The drive to import Indian Buddhist scriptures and knowledge further gained momentum in the subsequent centuries. This led to the emissary mission of Faxian (5th century CE), Xuanzang and Sheng Chi (7th century CE), whose itinerary covered Bengal especially port of Tāmralipti which was a port of disembarkation. The travel of Chinese esoteric Buddhist master Amoghavajra to India and Java during 8th century CE opened a horizon of

¹⁷ Fabrizio Torricelli, *Tilopā: A Buddhist Yogins of the Tenth Century*, p. 65

¹⁸ Sorensen has distinguished between esoteric Mahāyāna and Zhenyan Buddhism in China. To him the former was an 'embryonic' esoterism, while the latter was similar to Indian tantric Buddhism. For details see, Henrik H. Sorensen, "On Esoteric Buddhism in China: A Working Definition," in Charles D. Orzech et. al. (eds), *Esoteric Buddhism and the Tantras in East Asia*, Leiden: Brill, 2011, p. 157.

¹⁹ Ibid, 160.

²⁰ Tansen Sen, *India, China and the World: A Connected History*, Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, p. 39.

²¹ Jason Neelis, "Networks for Long-distance Transmission of Buddhism in South Asian Transit Zones," in Tansen Sen (ed), *Buddhism Across Asia: Networks of Materials, Intellectual and Cultural Exchange*, Vol- I, New Delhi: Manohar, 2014, p. 6.

interactive sphere between South Asia, Southeast Asia and Central Asia.²² Tibet and Nepal also became parts of this network as the Buddhist masters of Nālandā, Vikramśīla and Jagaddala set their feet there to gradually alter the Buddhist landscape of these regions. Initiation of Buddhism in Tibet by the east Indian pundits ushered in a renaissance in Tibet through the Himalayan corridor fed by the transmission of Buddhist texts, rituals and ideas.²³ Therefore, the Buddhist populace of the extensive connected regions like China, Tibet, Nepal, Himalayan region, Malay Peninsula and Java were the carriers of esoteric Buddhism in Asia. Bengal was an integral part in this network.

A few Buddhist texts like *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa*, *Tārāmūlakalpa*, *Sādhanamālā*, *Niṣpannayogāvalī*, and *Caryāpada* have been studied to understand the characteristic trends of tantric Buddhism in early medieval Bengal. The texts were largely available from Tibet, Nepal and Sub Himalayan corridor. On the other hand, the material objects, i.e., the tantra icons in sculpted and painted forms in illustrated manuscripts, comprise major set of sources for our understanding of the ideational scope of Tantra rituals and divine conceptions, and hence one of the chief objects of our study. We shall not go into any full-fledged iconographical study of these objects from art history perspective. But this study will delve into identification of the tantra elements in the sculpted and painted icons and draw the comparative conceptual links with the theoretical and liturgical parameters set down in the given tantra texts. These icons or objects of worship were found in a wide geography from southern Bihar in the west to Harikela or Chittagong in the east and from Lower Gangetic Delta in the south to Modern Dinajpur (West Bengal) – Bogura (Bangladesh) in the north. It is again within this wide geography that we shall look into the material and extra-material culture of the Buddhist viḥāras which were the principal centres of academic learning and religious preaching and which were also the seats of creation, preservation and transmission of religious culture. The viḥāras were the centres where congregations of Buddhist followers were likely to have converged and radiated from. Continuous influx of the itinerant Buddhist monks from Tibet, Myanmar, Arakan and Java rendered the viḥāras a vibrant character, conducive for the growth of complex and shared culture. Therefore, tracing the histories of the viḥāras with a perspective on how they were situated within the matrix of sub-regional life is also imperative.

²² Charles D. Orzech, “Esoteric Buddhism in the Tang: From Atikuta to Amoghavajra (651-780),” in Charles D. Orzech et. al. (eds), *Esoteric Buddhism and the Tantras in East Asia*, Leiden: Brill, 2011, p. 263.

²³ Ronald M. Davidson, *Tibetan Renaissance: Tantric Buddhism in the Rebirth of Tibetan Culture*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2004, p. 54.

Tantra and Tantric Buddhism: Mapping the Roots, Theory, and Philosophical Contours

The word 'tantra' in the early medieval context was connotatively used to indicate medical and alchemical knowledge beyond its religious implications. It was evidently used in the array of early medieval literature as an umbrella term to denote diverse material and ideological epistemologies. We shall however, focus on its underpinnings in the Buddhist textual, material and visual culture in the early medieval Bengal. The word 'tantra' is etymologically derived from the root 'tantri' meaning any kind of elaboration or knowledge.²⁴ Considering the root of the word we might surmise that tantra in its original form stood for the spread of knowledge. The word 'Tantra' featured in several first millennium BCE texts like Atharva Veda, Pāṇini's Aṣṭādhyāyī, Kātyāyana Sūtra etc. as pointed out by Monier Monier-Williams.²⁵ But the word assumed new connotation in early medieval context in the different parts of the subcontinent. The wider connotation of Tantra might refer to an extended literature, primarily exegetical and commentarial in nature, dealing with varied streams of knowledge in theoretical and practical manner.

Several ritualistic and idealistic currents under the rubric of tantra took a consolidated form in early medieval times and left its imprint in the major religious currents like Śaivism, Śāktism, Vaiṣṇavism and Buddhism. There was of course a broad-spectrum conception of divine forms and ritual practices that were evolving through time and early medieval Bengal witnessed a mature stage of this phenomena in multiple forms. Bengal, however, was not the only place that housed the phenomena, as it stood in connection with other regions in South Asia where such processes unfolded. The earliest tantric manifestation may arguably be noticed in a particular Śaivite tradition known as Atimārga which was practiced by several ascetic groups like the Pāñcārthikas, Lākulas and Somasiddhāntins.²⁶ In the 5th century CE, the Atimārga group gave rise to the Siddhānta or the Mantramārga tradition which was located in a number of scriptures like the Parameśvara, the Mātangapameśvara, the Kālottara as well as in several exegetical texts.²⁷ The Śaiva Siddhānta group envisaged the Bhairava as an esoteric

²⁴ Shashi Bhusan Dasgupta, *An Introduction to Tantric Buddhism*, Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1950, p. 2.

²⁵ Monier Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary: Cognate Indo-European Language* [1899], Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960, p. 436.

²⁶ Peter C. Bisschop, "From Mantramārga Back to Atimārga: Atimārga as a Self-referential Term," in Dominic Goodall et. al (eds), *Śaivism and the Tantric Traditions: Essays in Honour of Alexis G.J.S. Sanderson*, Leiden: Brill, 2023, pp. 15-30.

²⁷ Alexis Sanderson, "The Śaiva Age: The Rise and Dominance of Śaivism during the Early Medieval Period," in Shingo Einoo (ed), *Genesis and Development of Tantrism*, Tokyo: Institute of Oriental Culture, University of Tokyo, 2009, p. 42.

form of the Śiva who was represented in consortium with his female companion or Śakti. The Mantramārga literature like Svachchandatantra celebrated Svachchandabhairava and his consort Aghoreśvarī. The rise of Śaiva tantra was also integrally linked to the emerging regional state powers of early medieval India and Southeast Asia, as argued by Alexis Sanderson.²⁸ He has shown that the Śaiva brahmin gurus were playing pivotal role in the royal court by empowering the monarch by conducting the Śaiva initiation rituals. The juxtaposition of the royal consecration process (rājyābhiṣeka) and the performance of the mantra rituals was aimed at conferring the king with supernatural powers to win battles and secure legacy. These tendencies were not specific to the tantra as such but were increasingly emerging with esoteric symbolism and associated with rituals that were dipped in shamanic practices, lending the elements of tantra to the practices of rites distinct from the classical religious rituals.

Along with the ubiquitous presence of Śaivism, we may also note that tantra simultaneously appeared to be a dominant current in a number of Śākta and Vaiṣṇava cults. Sanderson has argued that the core conceptual and ritual elements of Śāktism and Vaiṣṇavism as well as Buddhism were heavily influenced by the Śaiva ritualistic and cultic traditions. The scriptural corpus of the vidyā goddesses including the Jayadrathayāmala, Kālikulā, Siddhayogeśvarīmata, Picumata owed their origin to the Śaiva Vidyāpīṭha texts like the *Tantraloka* of Abhinavagupta.²⁹ The later Śākta texts expounding the cult and worship of Kubjikā and Tripurasundarī too were believed to have developed by coopting the Śaiva rituals. N.N. Bhattacharyya on the contrary has argued that the appearance of the Śakti goddesses as the female companion in Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava tantra was actually an “indirect triumph of Śāktism.”³⁰ The Śākta tradition consolidated its position in Kashmir, Bengal and South India in the face of the growing rivalry with the existing Śaivite creeds adhering to Āgama. Vaiṣṇavism too, especially in South India and Kashmir, from 7th century CE onwards remained in the shadow of Śaivism.³¹ The tantric ritual foundation of the Vaiṣṇava Pañcarātra scriptures with characteristics like dikṣā, nyāsa, pujā etc. evidently postdated the emergence of the Śaiva Mantramārga trends.

The common philosophical idea of tantra prevailing among all the major tantric traditions like Śaivism, Śāktism, Vaiṣṇavism and Buddhism, might be grasped by a

²⁸ Alexis Sanderson, “The Śaiva Age,” p. 253.

²⁹ Ibid, p. 44.

³⁰ N.N. Bhattacharyya, *History of the Śākta Religion*, New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1978, p. 100.

³¹ Alexis Sanderson, “The Śaiva Age,” pp. 62-63.

comparative analysis of the tantric tenets. S.B. Dasgupta argues that there seems to be no essential difference between Brahmanical and Buddhist tantra in regards to a few philosophical ideas.³² Conceptual and ritual parallel of Brahmanical tantra might be found in the Buddhist tantra which theorizes the two principal aspects of the universe as Śūnyata (voidness) and Karuṇā (compassion) manifest in Prajñā and Upāya – the two primary attributes of the Ultimate Reality. The Prajñā and Upāya of the Buddhist tantra corresponded to the Śiva and Śakti of the Brahmanical tantra. The union of Prajñā and Upāya or the male and female entities represents the supreme non-dual state which is the final aim of the Tantric Buddhist soteriology. The philosophical contours of Prajñā and Upāya were vividly outlined in the *Prajñopāyaviniścayasiddhi* of Anaṅgavajra (7th century CE).³³ Fragments of Mahāyāna schools of philosophy may be found in the un-systematized form in another siddhi text - *Guhyasiddhi* (8th - 9th century CE) of Padmavajra, an exegetical text on *Guhyasamāja tantra* (5th – 6th century CE).³⁴ The doctrinal structure of the *Guhyasiddhi* expounds on the important Vajrayāna idea of reality (tattva), self-experience (svasamvedya), means (upāya) and expression (caryā). Simultaneously the concept of Śūnya was equally important in several Vajrayāna texts. It appeared in the core philosophical principle of the early Mahāyāna schools like the Mādhyamaka, Yogācārā and the Vijñānavāda.³⁵ The connection between the Yogācārā and the Vajrayāna Buddhism might be drawn by the interlude concept of Mahasukhavāda which is the central idea of Indrabhūti's *Jñanasiddhi*.³⁶ The texts stated that the idea of Nirvāṇa was comprised of three elements: Śūnya, Vijñāna and Mahāsukha. The idea of the union of the Bodhi mind and Śūnya can be traced back to the mythology of *Kāraṇḍavyūha* regarding Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva's renunciation of Nirvāṇa to resolve people's distress.³⁷

Scholars have identified the two most productive components of the Buddhist literary landscape of early medieval period (6th – 12th centuries CE) namely, the epistemological (texts on logic) and the tantric literature.³⁸ While the former is characterized by methodological,

³² Shashi Bhusan Dasgupta, *Obscure Religious Cult: As Background of Bengali Literature*, Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1946, p. xxxv.

³³ Dasgupta, *Obscure Religious Cult*, p. 37-41.

³⁴ Julian Schott, "Tattva, Vrata and Caryā: On the Relationship between the view and Practice in the First Chapter of Padmavajra's *Guhyasiddhi*," in *Religions*, Vol. 15, 2024, pp. 1-3.

³⁵ Benoytosh Bhattacharyya, *An Introduction to the Buddhist Esoterism*, New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1980, p. 26

³⁶ Benoytosh Bhattacharyya (ed.), *The two Vajrayāna Work*, Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1929, p. 57

³⁷ Bhattacharyya, *An Introduction to Buddhist Esoterism*, p. 29

³⁸ Vincent Eltschinger, "Buddhist Esoterism and Epistemology: Two Sixth Century Innovations as Buddhist Responses to Social and Religio-Political Transformation", in Eli Franco (ed), *Periodization and Historiography of Indian Philosophy*, Budapest: Wein, 2013, p. 172.

philosophical and logical characteristics, the latter was full of symbolic, ritualistic and esoteric contents. The Buddhist epistemological writings of late 6th centuries, especially that of Dharmakīrti and Dignāga, were concerned with the logical reasoning (hetucakra), dialectics and deduction. The tantric Buddhist literature, on the other hand, introduced a new trend within Mahāyāna by creating a new mantra-based soteriological scheme or mantranaya, opposed to pāramitānaya.³⁹ In order to identify the different chronological layers of the tantric Buddhist literature, the early works have been classified into ‘proto-tantric’ literature which marked a systematization and reorganization of the Buddhist esoteric ideas.⁴⁰ This development, according to Matsunaga Yukei, was characterized by a process of change from external rituals to internal meditation.⁴¹ Matsunaga contends that by the 7th century CE the dhāraṇī sūtras which were transported to China within the ambit of Mahayanistic rituals began to feature elements like mudrā, homa, maṇḍala and abhiṣeka. These trends became all the more apparent with time as found in the compositions of *Mahāvairocanābhisambodhi sūtra* and *Sarvatathāgatatattvasamgraha*. These two texts marked the full-fledged development of ‘pure Tantrism’ distinctive from ‘proto-Tantrism’.⁴²

Outlining the philosophical contours of tantra and tantric Buddhism reveals that from roughly the 6th century CE onwards the literary and the ritualistic traditions under Śaivism, Śāktism, Vaiṣṇavism and Buddhism indicated the emergence of a mantra and maṇḍala-based gnomic system. This system was not only directed towards achieving higher spiritual goals like nirvāṇa or moksa, but was also a complex medium to attain supernatural power. The diverse manifestations of tantra in the different regions of Indian sub-continent and beyond emerged in different time-periods. As far as tantric Buddhism is concerned its typical characteristics evolved through a long time-span from the early Mahāyāna tradition (late millennium BCE). This trend will be discussed in the next section.

Tracing the Early Mahāyāna Precursors of tantric Buddhism

The Proto-tantric elements might be found in the early Mahāyāna Sūtra literature like *Gaṇḍavyūha Sūtra* composed during the first centuries of the Common Era.⁴³ The narrative in

³⁹ Eltschinger, “Buddhist Esoterism and Epistemology”, p. 172.

⁴⁰ Ibid, p. 175.

⁴¹ Matsunaga Yukei, *The Guhyasamāja Tantra*, Ōsaka, 1978, pp. viii, xi.

⁴² Jan Willem de Jong, “A New History of Tantric Literature in India,” *Acta Indologica* 6 (1984), p. 98.

⁴³ Douglas Osto, *Power, Wealth and Women in Indian Mahayana Buddhism: The Gaṇḍavyūha-sutra*, London: Routledge, 2008.

the text begins with evoking the Śākyamuni who had been referred to as Vairocana. Then the story turned towards the interaction between Mañjuśrī and Sudhana, a merchant banker from the city of Dhānyakara, identified with Dhānyakataka of south India. Vairocana, the central figure of the *Mahāvairocanābhisambodhi Tantra*, also featured in the early Mahāyāna texts like *Daśabhūmikā* along with *Gaṇḍavyūha*. Douglas Osto has shown that a number of passages from the text narrate scenes describing rituals characterized by tantric Buddhist maṇḍala.⁴⁴ Though these depictions were not explicitly regarded as maṇḍala, but the visualization of ritual diagrams described in the narration come close to the tantric maṇḍala and hence can be considered to be early precursors of maṇḍala. Moreover, presence of *kalyānamitra* as the spiritual guide in the soteriological scheme of *Gaṇḍavyūha sūtra* might also correspond to the adoration for Guru as it evolved in the tantric system. The text projects a devotional path to obtain enlightenment by showing allegiance to kalyānamitra or good friend. Among the other proto-tantric characteristics, *Gaṇḍavyūha Sūtra* also prescribed the sexual yogā practice, that occurs when Sudhana met with the courtesan Vasumitrā. A group in the royal court praised the spiritual attainment of Vasumitrā and appreciated her as a sexual means to teach dharma. Therefore, many of the ideas expressed in the text have been regarded as “proto-tantric” tenets by Douglas Osto.

The foundation of tantric philosophy is believed to have been embedded in another Mahāyāna text of first century BCE – CE, the *Prajñāpāramitā*. It is inferred that in order to memorize the Buddha’s teaching, certain mnemonic categories were developed from the Nikāya tradition.⁴⁵ The explanation (prajñā) given by the Lord Buddha thus gradually evolved into a distinct literary tradition called *Prajñāpāramitā*. The early discourse of *Prajñāpāramitā* highlighted on the perfection (pāramitā) of Prajñā symbolized by an awakened mind with a strong cognition power. In the first phase of its development (100 BCE – 100 CE), the *Prajñāpāramitā* was a compendium of 8000 verses, and thus came to be known as *Aṣṭasahasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*.⁴⁶ The early version of the text is preserved in the translation of the Indo-Scythian translator Lokakṣema. The recently discovered Gāndhārī manuscript belonging to the 1st century CE is also very much identical to the translation of Lokakṣema.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Douglas Osto, “Proto-Tantric Elements in the Gaṇḍavyūha Sūtra”, in *The Journal of Religious History*, Vol. 33, No. 2 (June, 2009), p. 169.

⁴⁵ James B. Apple, “Prajñāpāramitā”, in K.T.S. Sarao and Jeffery D. Long (eds), *Buddhism and Jainism, Encyclopedia of Indian Religion*, Dordrecht: Springer, 2017, p. 925.

⁴⁶ Edward Conze, *The Prajñāpāramitā Literature*, Tokyo: The Reiyukai, 1978, p. 10.

⁴⁷ Harry Falk and Seishi Karashima, “A First Century Prajñāpāramitā Manuscript from Gāndhāra – Parivarta – 1 (Text from Split Collection 1)”, in *Arirab*, vol. XV (2012), pp. 19-21.

Karashima argues that the text was first composed in the Gāndhārī language and then into Chinese and Sanskrit.⁴⁸ He also argues that the tradition of the text may have originated in the Andhra region of south India where the Mahāsaṃghika school had a very visible existence. From there the tradition was transmitted to the uttarāpatha region encompassing the territory of Mathura, Taxila and Bactria.⁴⁹ From 2nd century CE onward, the text started to be recomposed into shorter and compact version. Significant reduction of the verses happened till 5th century CE when the summarized version of the text gave birth to a diverse textual tradition like the *Vajracchedikā* (Diamond Sūtra) and the *Prajñāpāramitāhṛdaya* (Heart Sūtra).⁵⁰ The earliest Sanskrit manuscript of the *Prajñāpāramitā* datable to second half of the 3rd century CE is found from the Bamiyan region in Afghanistan, while the text started to be widely translated in Central Asia and became the dominant Buddhist theological doctrine in China, Khotan, Sogdian and Tibet.

Edward Conze has shown that the final phase of the development of the *Prajñāpāramitā* literature (600 – 1200 CE) was marked by the advent of the tantric characteristics.⁵¹ Under the latest tradition the text was personified into a female deity of the same name with tantric attributes. The later recensions like the *Prajñāpāramitānayaśatapañcaśatikā* or the ‘150 methods’ incorporated important tantric terminologies like vajra, guhya and siddhi. The iconography of the deity first appeared in the sculptural arena of the Pāla Art during 7th century CE. The deity was conceptualized as an important manifestation of the Buddhist doctrinal ideas like Śūnyata or voidness, Pratityasamutpāda or the dependent co-arising and avadya or non-dichotomous reality. The theological idea of the *Prajñāpāramitā* in early medieval period hypothesized that reality is co-emergent and co-dependent with mind, discarding the polarization of consciousness and nature. In tantric Buddhist pantheon, *Prajñāpāramitā* was considered to be a prototype of all the female icons which emerged later. Tantric Buddhist doctrine envisaged prajñā as Nirvāṇa and upāya as saṃsāra. The Ultimate Reality was conceived by the union of wisdom (prajñā) and means (upāya) symbolized by bell and vajra respectively. Simultaneously, in the Yogā practices too, the female companion of the sādḥaka was idealized as Prajñā or Yoginī who represents the highest reality of voidness.

⁴⁸ Seishi Karashima, “Was the Aṣṭasahasrikā Prajñāpāramitā Compiled in Gāndhāra in Gāndhārī?”, in *ARIRAB*, vol. XVI (2013), pp. 174-79.

⁴⁹ Ibid, pp. 180-81.

⁵⁰ Apple, “Prajñāpāramitā”, p. 929.

⁵¹ Conze, *The Prajñāpāramitā Literature*, p. 23.

Several other Mahāyāna Sūtras under the rakṣā genre like *Manasvi-nāgarāja-sūtra* and *Mahāmāyūrī-Vidyārājñī-Sūtra* and *Pañcarakṣā-Sūtra* contained the earliest germ of tantric Buddhism. These rakṣā genre literature was designed by the Buddhist monks to get rid of the imminent danger of the snakebites and natural disaster in the newly set up Buddhist monasteries in the unknown adverse environment of Northwestern subcontinent. This literature was deeply revered by the Buddhist monks as it was believed to have revealed by the Buddha himself. Some of the earliest manuscripts of rakṣā literature were discovered from the Kuchar city by General Bower⁵² as well as in Gilgit, Afghanistan recently. The *Mahāmāyūrī-Vidyārājñī-Sūtra* was primarily meant to save the monks and laity from the adversaries of robbers, fire, water, poison and diseases.⁵³ As the peacock is a natural enemy of the snake, the *Mahāmāyūrī Dhāraṇī* was designed to save the monks from snakebites.⁵⁴ But it also became instrumental in manipulating power and securing kingship in China.⁵⁵ Similarly, the *Pañcarakṣā-Sūtra*, widely prevalent in Bengal and in the Newari Buddhism, which contained invocations to icons possessing protective powers against disease, evil spirits and disaster.⁵⁶ The deities under Pañcarakṣā group like Mahāmāyūrī and Mahāsītāvātī were invoked with a few sādhanas in the *Sādhanamālā*. Here we may note that that Mahāmāyūrī's invocation could save people from snakebites while the invocation of Mahāsītāvātī protected against smallpox. The Pañcarakṣā manuscripts were also widely found in the early medieval Bengal. S.K. Saraswati has mentioned at least seven dated manuscripts of the Pañcarakṣā Sūtra from the reign of Nayapāla, Rāmapāla and Govindapāla.⁵⁷ The dhāraṇīs of the rakṣā literature were apotropaic in nature as they could offer solution to daily mundane yet grave problem faced by the monks and the monks and the laity. These texts were widely translated in China, Centra Asia and Southeast Asia.

⁵² A.F. Rudolf Hornel (ed), *The Bower Manuscript: Fascimile Leaves, Nagari Transcripts, Romanised Transliteration, and English Transliteration with Notes*, Vol. I-VII, Calcutta: Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing, 1897.

⁵³ Ibid, Part VII, p. 239.

⁵⁴ Oskar von Hinubar, "Magic Protection in the Pālola Shāhī Kingdom: History and Context of the Rakṣā Text and Dhāraṇīs in the 7th century Gilgit, in Claudio Cicuzza (ed), *Katā me Rakkhā, Katā me Parittā: Protecting the Protective Texts and Manuscripts, Proceedings of the second International Pali Studies Week Paris 2016*, Bangkok and Lumbini: Fragile Palm Leaver Foundation, 2018, p. 218.

⁵⁵ Charles D. Orzech, "Metaphor Translation and the Construction of Kingship in the Scripture for Human Kings and the Mahāmāyūrī-vidyārājñī-sūtra," in *Cahiers d'Extreme-Asie*, Vol. 13, pp. 55-83.

⁵⁶ Jinah Kim, "A Book of Buddhist Goddesses: Illustrated Manuscripts of the Pañcarakṣā Sutra and their Ritual Use," in *Artibus Asiae*, Vol. 70, No. 2, p. 261.

⁵⁷ S.K. Saraswati, *Pal Juger Chitrakala* (in Bengali), Kolkata: Ananda Publisher, 1978, pp. 37-54.

The Buddhist esoteric doctrine in the early medieval phase underwent a lot of transformations and resulted in the emergence of a number of tantric Buddhist schools like Mantrayāna, Vajrayāna, Kālacakrayāna and Sahajayāna. Though these schools have been chronologically ordered by the early scholars like S.B. Dasgupta, the linear development of such schools is highly unlikely as the composition period of the doctrinal texts often overlap with each other. The exact connotation of the terms ‘esoteric Buddhism’ and ‘tantric Buddhism’ is still not beyond debate, though they have been widely used as coterminous.⁵⁸ Neither, do the terms ‘Vajrayāna’ and ‘Mantrayāna’ which are often found in the texts, singularly justify the various array of tantric Buddhism. The term Vajrayāna or the adamantine path of enlightenment first occurs in the seventh century CE.⁵⁹ It is also during this time that the term vajra meaning diamond or thunderbolt was introduced in several texts symbolizing the indestructible power of the awakened or enlightened. However, Anthony Tribe has warned against uncritically equating the Vajrayāna Buddhism with Tantric Buddhism as the former had the exclusive goal of speedy attainment of Buddhahood, while the latter embodied a variety of goals and ritual practices.⁶⁰ As an idealistic category Vajrayāna was preceded by Mantranaya or the ‘path of mantras’ and Pāramitānaya or the ‘path of perfection.’ Though Mantranaya constituted an important ideological framework of the Mahāyāna Buddhism, it is also believed that because of its overwhelming emphasize on the mantra practice, it contained the earliest germ of Tantric Buddhism. Matthew Kapstein has differentiated between the Vajrayāna and Mantranaya.⁶¹ For him the former signifies a developed Tantrism which became prominent during the last few centuries of Indian Buddhism, while the latter was followed in the monastic universities of India during the mid-1st millennium CE. Andrea Acri has argued that Vajrayāna and Mantranaya shared some common features in terms of their ritualistic paradigm and that Mantranaya as opposed to the exoteric Pāramitānaya was characterized by an esoteric salvation oriented path within Mahāyāna.⁶² Even the Tibetan commentator Tson-kha-pa in his *Snags rim chen mo* dealing with the stages of Tantra has stated that the Pāramitā and the Mantra methods

⁵⁸ Andrea Acri, “Introduction: Esoteric Buddhist Network Along the Maritime Silk Routes, 7th – 13th century AD,” in Andrea Acri (ed), *Esoteric Buddhism in Medieval Maritime Asia*. Singapore: ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute, 2016, p. 3.

⁵⁹ Paulo William and Anthony Tribe, *Buddhist Thought: A Complete Introduction to the Indian Tradition*, London: Routledge, 2000, p. 196.

⁶⁰ William and Tribe, *Buddhist Thought: A Complete Introduction to the Indian Tradition*, London: Routledge, 2000, p. 196.

⁶¹ Matthew Kapstein, *Reason’s Traces, Identity and Interpretation in Indian & Tibetan Buddhist Thought*, Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2001, p. 234.

⁶² Andrea Acri, “Introduction: Esoteric Buddhist Network,” p. 4.

which the Kālacakra work *Vimalaprabhā* has termed as cause and effect, were the two divisions of Mahāyāna Buddhism.⁶³ The Vajrayāna or the diamond vehicle embodied the idea of both the Prajñāpāramitā (the cause) and the Mantranaya concepts (the effect) showing that it was an offshoot of Mahāyāna.

Vajrayāna or the Diamond Way was popularized as a Buddhist path of salvation when the Yogā Tantra literature explicitly projected the term as their principal doctrinal tenet. The earliest evidence of vajra in Buddhism however, is found in the Pāli Suttas where the term is used as the weapon of Vajrapāṇi, Śākyamuni's Yakṣa guardian.⁶⁴ Vajrapāṇi later assumed the status of Bodhisattva and became a prominent figure in the Vajrayāna text, functioning as the Buddha's principal interlocutor. The word vajra also appeared in the 4th century CE text *Vajrasūcī* alluded to Aśvaghoṣa on dubious grounds. The text, although begins with paying homage to Mañjuhoṣa, has been characterized as a minor Upaniṣad as it deals with variety of precondition to become a brāhmaṇa.⁶⁵ Vajra, meaning either diamond or thunderbolt, signified the unbreakable and indestructible nature of an ideological concept. In the symbolic language of the Yoga Tantra literature like *Sarvatathāgatattvasaṃgraha* (7th century CE), the story of Śākyamuni's awakening involves his visualization of an upright vajra in his heart.⁶⁶ This visualization aided him in stabilizing and strengthening his awakened mind or bodhicittva which ultimately resulted in his attainment of Buddhahood and his renaming as Vajradhātu. Thus, Williams and Tribe have argued that the name Vajradhātu symbolizes the vajraisation of the important Mahāyāna concept of dharmadhātu as well as Buddhism as a whole.⁶⁷ The awakened mind or the bodhicittva was also rendered a vajraised form, signified by Tathāgata bodhicittvavajra, an important figure of Yogā and Mahāyogā Tantra. One can also observe the proliferation of the vajra names in the *Sarvatathāgatattvasaṃgraha* like Vajrapuṣpa (vajra flower) and Vajranṛtya (vajra dance) as offering goddess, Vajraratna (vajra gem), Vajrarājā (vajra king) and Vajrarāga (vajra passion) as bodhisattva, Vajrapāśa (vajra noose) and Vajrankuśa (vajra hook) as the gatekeeper. The two most important figures of Vajrayāna texts are Vajradhara and Vajrasattva who occupied the central position of Buddhist maṇḍalas.

⁶³ Alex Wayman, *The Buddhist Tantras: Lights on the Indo-Tibetan Esotericism*, New York: Routledge, 1973, p. 4.

⁶⁴ William and Tribe, *Buddhist Thought*, p. 117.

⁶⁵ Sujitkumar Mukhopadhyaya (ed), *The Vajrasūcī of Aśvaghoṣa: A Study of Sanskrit Text and Chinese Version*, Santiniketan: Visva-Bharati, 1960, pp. vii – xvii.

⁶⁶ Do-Kyun Kwon, *Sarva Tathāgata Tattva Saṃgraha: Compendium of All the Tathāgatas: A Study of its Origin, Structure and Teachings*, Unpublished PhD Thesis, SOAS, University of London, 2002, pp. 41-65.

⁶⁷ William and Tribe, *Buddhist Thought*, p. 218.

Vajrapāṇi and Vajradhara are often mentioned as interchangeable names in the tantric texts. In the Kriyā and Yoginī Tantras, vajra in a deity's name signifies his/her wrathful nature like Hevajra, Vajravārāhī and Vajrayoginī. The principal figures of the Guhyasamāja Tantra were Akṣobhyavajra and Mañjuvajra based on the well-known bodhisattva figures Akṣobhya and Mañjuśrī.

The sacred notion of vajra gained so much coinage in the Buddhist parlance of early medieval period that a lot of Buddhist theological ideas as well as the theoretical texts of Vajrayāna were named with the term. Sacred conceptual terms such as Vajragarbha, Vajragiri, Vajrajñānaparvata, Vajradāka, Vajratuṇḍa, Vajradṛdhanetra, Vajradvajā, Vajranābhi, Vajrapramardin, Vajramaṇḍala, Vajramālā, Vajramuṣṭi etc. occurred regularly in the tantric Buddhist texts.⁶⁸ Simultaneously the name of the Buddhist deities like Vajragāndhārī, Vajracarcika, Vajrajñānaparvata, Vajradāki, Vajradharā, Vajrapāṇi, Vajrabhāskarī, Vajrabhṛkūti, Vajrabhairavī appeared in the rapidly expanding Buddhist pantheon.⁶⁹ The relevance of the vajra in the secretive practice of tantric Buddhism might be attested by Ānandagarbha's commentary entitled *Śri-Paramādi-tīka*. Here, the author has expounded the five secret notions of esoteric Buddhism essential for initiation of a novice by a vajra guru or Vajrācārya-abhiṣeka. The concept of five secret has been personified in the five goddesses like Vajrasattva, Rāgavajra, Vajrakilikila, Vajrasṃṛiti and Vajrakameśvarī.⁷⁰ The ritual manuals of Vajrayāna Buddhism also embraced the term vajra as might be gleaned from the Buddhist scholars of early medieval Bengal like Abhayakaragupta's *Vajrāvalī* and Nāropā's *Vajra-pada-sāra-saṃgraha-pañjikā*. Thus, the proliferation of the vajra names has given the Vajrayāna Buddhism a distinctive identity, probably within Mahāyāna, by proclaiming their affiliation to a specific Buddhist form.

Subsequent school of tantric Buddhism like Kālacakrayāna developed its own theoretical paradigm and doctrinal position as manifested in some of the commentarial text like *Sekoddeśatikā* by Nāropā, a Buddhist master of Bengal.⁷¹ The Kālacakra initiation process gained coinage in Nāropā's commentary which characterized Kālacakra as the immutable and unchangeable one. Waddell has noted that *Kālacakra tantra* was characterised by a monstrous

⁶⁸ Franklin Edgerton, *Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit Grammar and Dictionary*, Vol. II, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1985, p. 467.

⁶⁹ Ibid, pp. 467-68.

⁷⁰ Alex Wayman, *The Buddhist Tantras*, pp. 37-38.

⁷¹ Mario. E. Carelli, *Sekoddeśatikā of Nādapāda (Nāropā): Being a Commentary of the Sekoddeśa Section of the Kālacakra Tantra*, Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1941.

poly-demonist doctrine datable to 10th century CE.⁷² Kālacakra system has been also designated as the extreme form of tantric Buddhism, devoid of any philosophy. Its theological hypothesis attempts to explain the universe and its secret power by the union with the Ādi-Buddha. The reason why the predominance of the demonic Buddha and the terrible gods and goddesses is there in the Kālacakra fold remained ambiguous. The word Kālacakra might literally stand for the wheel (cakra) of destruction (kāla).⁷³ The text *Kālacakra Tantra* however is not entirely devoted to the worship of the demonic and the terrible gods and goddesses. The text unfolds with the narrative of King Suchandra reaching out to Lord Buddha requesting him to teach the yogā of Kālacakra which was a mean of salvation for all the people of Kali age.⁷⁴ In the soteriological scheme of the *Kālacakra tantra*, body is represented as the medium which contained every object and localities of the universe as well as the time. The text epitomizes the concept of Sahaja and its attainment through several sexo-yogic practices principally through the control of the vital winds (prāṇa and āpaṇa).

The most characteristic presence of tantric Buddhism in early medieval Bengal was connected to the Sahajayāna, a later school of tantric Buddhism. Many proponents of the abstract idealism of Sahajayāna were the Buddhist siddhācāryas whose hagiographies attributed their origin and roots to Bengal.⁷⁵ Moreover, the proto-Bengali vernacular language of the Sahajīya text like *Caryāpada* prove it beyond doubt that its tradition was dominant in Bengal and eastern India. The Sahajīyā school is known for its non-conformist nature and believed to be a direct offshoot of the Vajrayāna school. The Sahajīyā poets of the Dohā and the songs registered their protest against the formalities of life and religion. The philosophical position propounded in the *Caryāpada* expressed their dissent against any kind of ritual activities, severe austerities and scriptural knowledge. The unconventional ideological position of the Sahajīyās has distinguished them from the doctrinal position of the Vajrayāna. The goal of the Sahajayāna school was to realize the ultimate innate (Sahaja) nature of the self and of the dharma. Lui pā in the first song of the *Caryāpada* propounded that our mind is solely responsible for the creation of an illusory world. The reason for this unsteady mind is due to the defiling influence of nature. The world of the human existence is believed to be provisional

⁷² L. Austine Waddell, *Buddhism and Lamaism of Tibet*, New Delhi: Gaurav Publishing House, 1978 (Reprint), p. 15.

⁷³ S.B. Dasgupta, *An Introduction to Tantric Buddhism*, p. 73

⁷⁴ Ibid, p. 74.

⁷⁵ Alaka Chattopadhyay, *Churaśi Siddher Kāhinī* (A Bengali Translation of the Tibetan *Caturaśīti-Siddha-Pravṛitti*), Kolkata: Anustup, 2019, pp. 31–38.

(saṃvṛti-satya) and the provisional nature of the world is revealed to us when we realise that everything here is impermanent.

The philosophy and idealism were one of the many characteristics of tantric Buddhism. It may be noted that tantric Buddhism was also characterized by a peculiar system of psychical, magical and mysticism practice. It is for this features that most of the modern-day scholars consider it to be a transgressive, anti-nomian practice. The basic trends of tantric Buddhism were not only embedded in the intellectual practice of the Buddhist scholars who laid down doctrinal theology of an esoteric culture. It also grew by embracing some of the extremely occult ritual and practices. The philosophy and rituals were the two sides of the same coin. The ritual horizon of tantric Buddhism was replete with mantra dhāraṇī maṇḍala which shall be discussed in the next section.

Dhāraṇī, Mantra and Maṇḍala: The Ritual Paraphernalia of Tantric Buddhism, Magic and Mysticism

Survey of the philosophical contours of tantric Buddhism alone, cannot do justice to the understanding of the phenomenon. Ritualism was another strong pillar of tantric Buddhism. The factors responsible for the rise of an alternative religious system like Tantric Buddhism were not only rooted in the esoteric emancipatory ideology of certain Indian philosophical currents, but were also embedded in a number of pre-tantric heterodox practices. The terminological and functional aspects of these heterodox practices have been designated as magical, sorcery and witchcraft by a few Indologists. A group of scholars of tantric Buddhism have expressed their unequivocal support to the elite and intellectual origin of Tantrism.⁷⁶ The root of tantra, they argued, were firmly embedded in the wide range of doctrinal and exegetical literature created by the theologians of the different tantric orders like Śaiva, Śākta, Vaiṣṇava, Buddhist and Jain. The non-literate domain has been entirely disregarded and any endeavor to consider the non-literate groups to trace the genesis of Tantra has been denounced as fallacious and inconsequential.⁷⁷ The authentic understanding of the Tantra is attributed to the intellectual literate tradition exclusively. They have focused on the sectarian lineage tradition manifested in the preceptor-disciple transmission of knowledge and practice. However, gleanings of the tantric system reveals that ritual practice was a principal pillar of tantric Buddhism which

⁷⁶ Alexis Sanderson, “Vajrayāna: Origin and Function”, in *Buddhism into the year 2000*, Bangkok: Dharmakaya Foundation, 1994, p. 92.

⁷⁷ Christian K. Wedemeyer, *Making Sense of Tantric Buddhism: History, Semiology and Transgression in the Indian Tradition*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2012, p. 196

evolved by juxtaposing the materialistic rituals with a firm ideological parameter. The ritual paraphernalia of tantric Buddhism and Tantra as a whole often indicate to a non-literate and non-intellectual origin of Tantra. Ronald Davidson has argued that in an alternative religious system like Tantra, the role of the intellectual elites was a 'second-order phenomenon' in rationalizing and crystalizing the scattered heterodox rituals.⁷⁸ He rather championed the diffusionist theory, by arguing that we have to consider the multi-nodal roots of Tantra which was gradually crystalizing in the early medieval period.

The prevalence of magic and mysticism in a religious practice and their integral relationship with the greater religious worldview have been explained by a number of sociologists and anthropologists. The sociological approach to religion, rituals and rites gained coinage in the beginning of the twentieth century with the study of French anthropologist Emile Durkheim. He convincingly argued that religion is principally a social phenomenon.⁷⁹ Its inception was rooted in and coincided with the human endeavour to socially organize themselves. Almost all the religions of present day are governed by the notion of sacred and profane. While a religious order stands as an ideal representation of sacred, the rituals might be considered as the rule of conduct conforming to the notion of sacred. Through the sacred notion of religion people legitimize their social structure and communal ties. Thus, religion becomes instrumental in forging communal identification. To facilitate the functioning of the sacred notion of religion in the society, rituals have been designed. Through the observance of different rituals, a 'passionate intensity' is provoked in human beings to rouse the feeling collective belonging rather than individual entity. Durkheim's approach however met with criticism by a few scholars for being ahistorical and overwhelmingly dependent on the societal relations.⁸⁰

Durkheim's sociological approach was carried forward by the British anthropologist A.R. Radcliff-Brown who argued that there was a specific pattern of the reciprocation between religious organization and social structure manifested by the different notion of God for different social groups.⁸¹ He also emphasised on the ahistorical aspect of social structure to

⁷⁸ Ronald M. Davidson, "Magicians, Sorcerers and Witches: Considering Pretantric Non-sectarian Sources of Tantric Practices", in *Religions*, Vol. 8, No. 188, p. 2.

⁷⁹ Steven Lukes, *Émile Durkheim: His Life and Work: A Historical and Critical Study*, New York: Penguin, 1977, p. 237.

⁸⁰ Catherine Bell, *Rituals: Perspective and Dimensions*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 25.

⁸¹ Alfred R. Radcliffe-Brown, "Religion and Society," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 75 (1945), pp. 33–43.

explain the origin of religion. After meticulously studying the ritual culture of Andaman Islanders and the Arunta group of western Australia, Radcliff-Brown concluded that societal needs predominantly shape the religious concepts.⁸² These tribal societies with an oral tradition lacked any kind of written records. As a result, the social anthropologists studying these societies ended up in diminishing the historical importance and gave primacy to their social structure. In regards to the origin of the rituals, Radcliff-Brown contrasted the view of Durkheim and argued that rites preceded religious belief. In his theoretical paradigm the social functionalism exercised a profound impact on the ritual life, while affecting little the religious belief and customs.⁸³ According to him rites essentially embody a 'regulated symbolic expression' which is transmitted through generations, thus constituting the societal customs. The religious rituals determine a social order by promoting and legitimizing the core social value repeatedly. He envisaged rituals as a specific mode of expression which create a social sentiment on the foundation of moral and spiritual power.

Bronislaw Malinowski argues, in contrast to Durkheim, that rituals were practically designed to address the mundane need of the society like saving people from anxiety, distress, fear and doubt.⁸⁴ He enumerates that religious idea was embedded in the individual idea of death and might be envisaged as a desperate attempt of intimidated man to get rid of his plight. Malinowski foregrounded his theory in the individual cognitive process of man and his practical experience. He contends that a few public rituals can be attributed with social functionalities. The magical rituals particularly are performed with the aim of alleviating anxiety, while religious rituals are void of any social purpose and meant for communication with God. The theories of Malinowski and Radcliff-Brown might be referred to as a functionalist interpretation of rituals as opposed to a comparative approach where myth and rituals were viewed in juxtaposition. For the advocates of the functionalist interpretation the magical rituals are the mediums through which the social order is maintained. The rituals and religion are therefore designated as a social mechanism to maintain an ordered society.

A ritual action is often distinguished from the other modes of action by its non-utilitarian and non-rational characteristics. The supposed non-rational base of rituals, as opposed to scientific mode of acting, has marked a difference between ancient and modern

⁸² A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, *The Andaman Islanders* [1922], New York: Free Press, 1964, pp. 229–30.

⁸³ Jacques Waardenburg (ed.), *Classical Approaches to the Study of Religion*, 2 vols. The Hague: Mouton, 1973, vol. 1, p. 591.

⁸⁴ Bronislaw Malinowski, *Magic, Science and Religion, and Other Essays* [1925], Boston: Beacon Press, 1948.

societies and between the notions of profane and sacred.⁸⁵ Even within the broader ritual landscape, several dimensions have been identified where subtle difference between religious rituals and magical rituals has been defined. For example, the worship of a deity for non-utilitarian purpose has been identified as religious, while the rituals performed for healing or rainfall are regarded as magical. Therefore, the magical rituals, often performed for achieving mystical and supernatural goal has been rendered an inferior position than the high religiosity. The theoretical framework of Tylor and Frazer has drawn a boundary between the higher and lower mode of Christianity. While the former is characterized by monotheism, morality and understanding the universal truth, the latter was all about amoral, polytheistic and directed towards fulfilling personal advantage. For Tylor magic is fundamentally different from religion and is more similar to science. He has referred to magic as a pseudo-science which might be distinguished from science by its erroneous method of reasoning. Frazer, on the other hand, has regarded magic as a “bastard art” which offer a tricky method to fulfil the mundane goal.⁸⁶

The magic, sorcery and witchcraft, noticeable among the many non-literate sections in the history of the Indian subcontinent, have been often regarded as the ritualistic precursors of Tantra. The rituals of the Indian sorcerers were probably appropriated by the tantric groups. The *Brahmajālasutta* in the *Dighanikāya* mentions 115 types of different skills including sign reading and creating illusion, which can be tantamount to the sorcery and witchcraft.⁸⁷ Through the description of these peculiar feats, one might anticipate that such behavior was aggravated among different individuals. The magical rituals of deaths or yātudhānas mentioned in the Angirasa section of the *Atharvaveda Śaunakīya* is regarded as a form of sorcery. The prefix yātu in the word yātudhāna is considered to be the early term for magic or sorcery. Atharvaveda mentions six kinds of yātudhāna actions like descending from the air, seizing thing from being obtained etc. In the Chinese translation of the *Samyuktanikāya* too, the spirits like preta and yakṣa were described as descending from air.⁸⁸ The vetāla rites, associated with the dead, prescribed in the *Bhaiṣajyaguru-Sūtra* were connected to the rituals of the rakṣasa and yakṣa. The ritual object of skull or Kapāla, considered to be one of the principal tantric paraphernalia of the Śaiva Kāpālikas as well as the tantric Buddhist ascetics, could be traced back among the several early heterodox sects who popularized the skull as a cult object associated with

⁸⁵ Catherine Bell, *Rituals: Perspective and Dimensions*, p. 46.

⁸⁶ James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, London: Macmillan, 1955, vol. 10, p. vi.

⁸⁷ Ronald M. Davidson, “Magicians, Sorcerers and Witches,” p. 4.

⁸⁸ *Ibid*, p. 9.

cremation ground.⁸⁹ The skull and skull-cups operated as the ritual medium of the spirit world to communicate with and manipulate the power of yaksa, piśāca bhūtas and rakṣasa. The employment of these ritual objects might be traced back in *Taittirīyasamhitā* and Pāli Vinaya. An episode of the *Asilakkhaṇa Jātaka* mentions that the rituals of the ikṣaṇikā spirit assists a princess to transcend in the air in order to reach to her beloved prince.⁹⁰ The Mahāvagga section of the Theravāda Vinaya mentions a layman named Mendhaka whose family possessed miraculous power or iddhānubhava. His father had the power of filling up the granary with the shower of grain, the son was in possession of an inexhaustible bag of money and his wife has a never-emptying pot. They acquired the merit by feeding a *pratyekabuddha* during the time of a famine. The Buddhist scriptural scheme allocated less honourable position to the wizards with extraordinary ability like vidyādhara, dākinī and yakṣinī.⁹¹ These magical beings, considered to be semi-divine in nature, inhibited in both the human and non-human sphere in the social margin.

One of the curious ritual traditions of Tantric Buddhism was dhāraṇī, commonly regarded as the strings of unintelligible words with magical power. The dhāraṇīs are coded phrases which were representative of the coded teaching of a scripture or the entire canon. The earliest specimen of dhāraṇī might be noted in the writings of the Gāndhāra region. They were designed to replicate the alphabets of *a-ra-pa-ca-na* in the northwestern region.⁹² The dhāraṇīs in their earliest form were non-referential mantra phrases meant for apotropaic purpose and later came to denote the encoded scripture and doctrine. By the employment of dhāraṇī the Buddhist authority was taking an endeavour to deconstruct the tie between word and object. Some of the Mahāyāna literatures contends that, as the dhāraṇīs are non-referential and literally means nothing, it signifies the nature of emptiness. Thus, the dhāraṇīs embodied the important doctrinal idea of śūnya in the Mahāyāna Buddhism. The pragmatics of dhāraṇī, Davidson has argued, essentially was impacted by the linguistic aspect of the Vedic school.⁹³ Nevertheless, the early mythological reference to the dhāraṇīs were certainly Buddhist. How the dhāraṇīs of

⁸⁹ Ronald M. Davidson, “More pre-Tantric Sources of Tantrism: Skulls and skull-cups”, in Andrea Acri and Paolo E. Rosati (eds), *Tantra, Magic and Vernacular Religions in Monsoon Asia: Texts, Practices and Practitioners from the Margins*, New York: Routledge, 2023, pp. 12-39.

⁹⁰ Davidson, “Magicians, Sorcerers and Witches,” p. 11.

⁹¹ Ibid, p. 13.

⁹² Peter Skilling, “An Arapachana Syllabary in Bhadrakalpika-sūtra,” in *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 116, No. 3, pp. 522-523.

⁹³ Ronald M Davidson, “Esoteric Buddhism in the Matrix of Early Medieval India”, in Abhishek Sing Amar et al. (eds), *On the Regional Development of Early Medieval Buddhist Monasteries in South Asia*, Rindas Series of Working Paper 34, Kyoto: Ryukoku University, 2021, p. 3.

the Mahāyāna Buddhism of 5th and 6th centuries gradually percolated in the Tantric Buddhism from 7th century CE onwards is rather ambiguous. The Mahāyāna texts of the 6th century CE that were being translated into Chinese showed the curious presence of different tantric elements like scattered maṇḍala, mudrā, mantra and the initiation rituals. The *Amoghapaśaḥṛdaya* and *Mahādharmaḍipadhāraṇīsūtra* translated by Jñānagupta in the second half of the 6th century CE never made any distinction between the esoteric and the exoteric practice of the dhāraṇī rituals.⁹⁴ Atikuta's *Dhāraṇīsamgraha* (7th century CE) is arguably considered to be the earliest work of tantra that prescribed the practice of homa (fire ritual), bali (sacrificial ritual), mantra, maṇḍala and dhāraṇī must be kept secret from the uninitiated candidates.⁹⁵

Scholars of Indian Buddhist literature and religion have described dhāraṇī from various aspects like an advanced intellectual exercise, showcasing Buddhist spells, embodiment of mnemonic aides for memorization of scriptures, summery of specific ideas of the Buddhist doctrine etc.⁹⁶ However, a holistic assessment of the early dhāraṇīs reveals that they not only served as the mnemonic device to codify the abstract doctrinal ideas, but also applied for non-intellectual purposes. Its principal characteristic was that it was incomprehensible to the readers of the Sanskrit texts. The *Mahāprabhāvadhāraṇī-sūtra* contains 18 unintelligible forms of the four truths that were originally composed in the language from beyond the Indian subcontinent.⁹⁷ The early medieval period witnessed an expansion in the horizon of the dhāraṇī which was giving space to the rising Buddhist theology beyond the orthodox Mahāyāna doctrine. For example, the *ye dharma* formula inscribed in the pedestal of the early medieval Buddhist sculptures was transformed into the *pratītyasamutpāda dhāraṇī* in the early medieval Buddhist texts. The formula signified the important Buddhist idea of dependent origination. Nevertheless, considering the incipient nature of the dhāraṇī we might surmise that they reflected the semantic values of the Buddhist Sūtras.⁹⁸ The dhāraṇīs were the reservoirs of the early Mahāyāna experience of mastering the doctrine. Beyond its meaningless utterance, it had the capability of storing the scripture in memory and transmitting the knowledge through generations. It was considered to be virtually efficacious as it played a pivotal role in the ritual

⁹⁴ Ronald M Davidson, "Esoteric Buddhism in the Matrix of Early Medieval India", p. 18.

⁹⁵ Ibid, p. 18.

⁹⁶ For detailed Historiography on the Study of the *dhāraṇī* literature see Ronald M Davidson, "Studies in Dhāraṇī Literature I: Revisiting the Meaning of the Term Dhāraṇī", in *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, Vol. 37, No. 2, 2009, pp. 98-106.

⁹⁷ Ibid, p. 107.

⁹⁸ Ronald M. Davidson, "Studies in Dhāraṇī Literature I," p. 108

landscape of tantric Buddhism. Considering its simultaneous miraculous role in the tantric Buddhism, dhāraṇī has been also considered as reflective of pragmatic historical experience.⁹⁹

Mantra in the ritualistic landscape of esoteric Buddhism must be differentiated from dhāraṇī, although they both appear very identical. The ubiquitous presence of mantra in the South Asian traditions predated the emergence of Buddhism.¹⁰⁰ Mantra in the esoteric Buddhism is used for incantation, invoking a deity and performing miraculous or mundane deeds. Mantra in the tantric Buddhism is consisted of short strings of syllable, not more than one or two lines, in contrast to dhāraṇī which is longer. Mantra might be found in the Vinaya, though absent in the Pāli works.¹⁰¹ In the early medieval context mantra and dhāraṇī conceptually overlap with each other. In many cases mantra appears to be a subset of dhāraṇī, though it never signified a coded scripture. Unlike the mnemonic strategy embedded in the dhāraṇī, mantra is principally chanted for an enigmatic result. The mantras of different deities have been classified hierarchically in the Kriyā, yogā and anuttarayogā tantras. A few mantras are considered to be extremely powerful and meant to be secretly practiced by the initiated, while other were of relatively low status. The mantra is often prescribed to be ideally practiced before a ritual diagram known as maṇḍala. The maṇḍalas are envisaged as cosmic diagram, often circular or rectangular in shape. Tantric Buddhist literature from 7th century CE onwards contained abundance of maṇḍala diagram, prescribed to be drawn on the earth or a piece of cloth known as paṭa.¹⁰² Each of the five pañcatathāgata figures like Akṣobhya, Amitābha, Vairocana, Amoghasiddhi and Ratnasambhava was assigned a maṇḍala. Thus, the maṇḍalas were deified and became the embodiment of the Buddhist deities. Generally, the principal figure is placed in the middle of the maṇḍala and the subsidiary deity and the doorkeepers were placed in the outer circle. During the late tantric Buddhism in 9th – 10th centuries, the demi-Gods and the wrathful deities like Hevajra and Hayagriva were dedicated maṇḍala too. The esoteric rituals were often prescribed to be performed in front of the maṇḍala. Abhayakaragupta's *Niṣpannayogāvalī* (12th century CE) prescribed twenty-four maṇḍalas for the different Buddhist divinities.

⁹⁹ Ronald M. Davidson, "Studies in Dhāraṇī Literature II: Pragmatics of Dhāraṇī", in *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, Vol. 77, No. 1, 2014, p. 11.

¹⁰⁰ Charles D. Orzech and Henric H. Sorensen, "Mudrā, Mantra, Maṇḍala", in Charles D. Orzech et al. (eds), *Esoteric Buddhism and the Tantras in East Asia*, Leiden: Brill, 2011, p. 78

¹⁰¹ *Ibid*, p. 79.

¹⁰² Matthew Kapstein, "Weaving the World: The Ritual Art of the *Paṭa* in Pāla Buddhism and its Legacy in Tibet", in *History of Religion*, Vol. 34, No. 3, pp. 241-262.

The earliest antecedents of the mantra and dhāraṇī comes from the recent discovery of the palm-leaf manuscript from the Gāndhāra region, especially the Bajaur district in Afghanistan. The manuscripts, mostly written in Sanskrit and Gāndhārī language using Brāhmī and Kharoṣṭhī script can be dated between 1st century BCE – 2nd century CE.¹⁰³ The manuscripts contained mostly commentarial and scholastic works like the early Mahāyāna avadāna and sūtra literature, which is believed to have been composed in the region itself. After the analysis of the philosophical undercurrent of these texts, experts have suggested that they belonged to the Buddhist Sarvāstivādīn community.¹⁰⁴ The most spectacular type of literature in the Bajaur manuscripts was the rakṣā genre literature like Mahāmāyūrī Sūtra and *Manasvi-nāgarāja-Sūtra*. Peter Skilling has argued that this special genre of literature is meant to bestow magical power.¹⁰⁵ Some of these texts were contemporary to the Buddha, while a few had been composed after his demise. The Theravada Buddhist often regarded these texts as parittā (savior) which safeguards the monks from several evil and misery. After studying the preponderance of mantra in the *Manasvi-nāgarāja-sūtra*, Ingo Strauch has shown that the magical formula was introduced to safeguard the monks living in the remote and dangerous environment.¹⁰⁶ The magical power of the mantra is meant to confer the monks with protective power. This power could be accessed by the monks, nuns as well as the laity. These mantras were also inserted in the Sanskrit Mahāyāna Sūtra literature in the form of a passage and came to be regarded as mantrapada.¹⁰⁷ The prevalence of mantra and dhāraṇī can be also found in the *Saddharmapuṇḍarika-sūtra* which uses the term *mantrapadadhāraṇī* and *dhāraṇīmantrapada*. The protective mantras were often distinguished from the spiritual mantras meant for attainment of Nirvāṇa.

Therefore, the early elements of tantric Buddhist rituals like mantra, dhāraṇī and maṇḍala may be referred back to some of the early historic Mahāyāna literature. The primary reason to design these magical spells seems to be the apotropaic purposes to avert

¹⁰³ Stefan Baums, “Truth and Scripture in Early Buddhism: Categorical Reduction as Exegetical Method in Ancient Gandhāra and Beyond,” in Tansen Sen (ed), *Buddhism Across Asia: Networks of Material, Intellectual and Cultural Exchange*, Vol. I, Singapore: ISEAS, 2014, p. 19.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, p. 21.

¹⁰⁵ Peter Skilling, “The Rakṣā Literature of the Sravakayāna,” in *Journal of the Pali Text Society*, 16, pp. 109-82.

¹⁰⁶ Ingo Strauch, “The evolution of the Buddhist rakṣā genre in the Light of New Evidence from Gāndhāra: The Manasvi-nāgarāja-sūtra from the Bajaur collection of Kharoṣṭhī Manuscripts,” in *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London*, Vol. 77, No. 1, p. 69.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, p. 68.

danger or evil forces. The rituals can be regarded as the obvious response of the Buddhist literary and monkish community to the social anxiety caused by the mundane problem.

Review of the Secondary Literature

The subject of Tantric Buddhism has been widely written on in the last one and a half centuries by a wide range of scholars across the world. The early literature on the matter was produced by the European colonisers who were awestruck to perceive the enigmatic cult of tantric Buddhism in Tibet and Himalayan belt. They keenly noticed that this particular Buddhism, by the merit of its peculiar ritualism and esoterism, was different from the traditional Buddhism that has been preached in the Pāli canon. The early writers of the late 19th century like Emil Schlagintweit,¹⁰⁸ C.F. Koppen,¹⁰⁹ L. Austine Waddell¹¹⁰ and W.W. Rockhill¹¹¹ referred to it as Lamaism after the priests of the Tibetan Buddhism. Narratives and records left by the visitors in Tibet like Giorgi, Vasiliev, Schiefner, Foucaux Eitel, Pander and Sarat Chandra Das¹¹² proved to be extremely helpful for the study of Tibetan Buddhism.¹¹³ Their studies mostly concentrated on the enigmatic religious culture of Tibet. Waddell for the first time endeavoured to give a comprehensive picture of the Tibetan Buddhism by highlighting its doctrine, mythology, Gods, ritual, sorcery, festivals and play. He pointed out that the foundation of Lamaism in Tibet can be credited to Guru Padmasambhava or Rin-po-che, the resident monk of Nālandā, who visited Tibet in 747 CE at the request of the king Thisron-Detsan.¹¹⁴ As the Indian Tantric Buddhism was little known to Waddell, he noted, “Primitive Lamaism may therefore be defined as a priestly mixture of Śivaite mysticism, magic and Indo-Tibetan demonolatry overlaid by a thin varnish of Mahāyāna Buddhism.”¹¹⁵

A vast body of literature on Indian tantric Buddhism started to unfold from the second decade of the 20th century after the finding of a few manuscripts of the Sanskrit Buddhist texts

¹⁰⁸ Emil Schlagintweit, *Buddhism in Tibet: Illustrated by Literary Documents and objects of Religious Worship, with an account of the Buddhist systems preceding it in India*, London: 1868.

¹⁰⁹ C.F. Koppen, *Die Lamaische Hierarchie and Kirche*, Vol I-II, Berlin, 1859.

¹¹⁰ L. Austine Waddell, *Buddhism and Lamaism of Tibet: With its Mystic Cults, Symbolism and Mythology and in its relation to Indian Buddhism* [1894], New Delhi, Gaurav Publishing House, 1985.

¹¹¹ W.W. Rockhill, *The Life of the Buddha and the Early History of his Order: From Tibetan Work in Bkash-hgyur and Bstan-hgyur With Notices from the Early History of Tibet and Khotan*, 1884. *The Land of the Lamas*, London, 1891.

¹¹² Sarat Chandra Das, *Journey to Lhasa and Central Tibet*, London: John Murray, 1902.

¹¹³ For details of the travel accounts see Waddell, *Buddhism and Lamaism of Tibet*, pp. 578-83.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 24.

¹¹⁵ L.A. Waddell, *Buddhism and Lamaism of Tibet*, p. 30.

of Indic origin. It caught the attention of Indian and western academia from 1920s onwards particularly after the edition and translation of a few tantric Buddhist texts like – *Guhyasamājatantra*,¹¹⁶ *Sadhānamālā*,¹¹⁷ *Niṣpannayogāvalī*,¹¹⁸ *Prajñopāyoviniścayasiddhi* and *Jñānasiddhi*,¹¹⁹ *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa*,¹²⁰ *Sekoddeśatikā*,¹²¹ and *Hevajratantra*.¹²² Subsequently, the continuous edition and translation of the other Tantric Buddhist texts like *Cakrasamvaratantra*¹²³ and *Caryāmelāpakapradīpa*¹²⁴ added significantly to our hitherto limited knowledge on this obscure subject. Each of these texts and their translation has unveiled the significant aspects of the tantric Buddhist tenets and practice. The dominant impression of the early scholars on the subjects was that it was a degenerative practice that transgressed in and polluted the orthodox Buddhist ideology. Rajendralal Mitra noted that the ritual practice prescribed in the tantric manuscripts can be “best treated as ravings of madmen.”¹²⁵ At the same time, he also acknowledged that these were considered to be sacred by millions.

So far, the study of tantra and tantric Buddhism has been overwhelmingly dedicated to the philosophical aspect, with little attempt to illuminate its historical development. In this present work, we are attempting to make a foray into the historical understanding of the subject. The Buddhist images of the early medieval Bengal have been mostly discussed from the iconographical and artistic points of view. We propose to survey the images to understand the material culture and physical presence of tantric Buddhism in Bengal. The previous literature

¹¹⁶ B. Bhattacharyya (ed and tr), *The Guhyasamāja Tantra or Tathāgataguhyaka*, Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1931. Alex Wayman (ed and tr), *Yoga of the Guhyasamājatantra: The Arcane Lore of Forty Verses*, New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1977.

¹¹⁷ B. Bhattacharyya (ed and tr), *Sādhānamālā*, Baroda: Oriental Institute, Vol. I in 1925, Vol II in 1928.

¹¹⁸ B. Bhattacharyya (ed and tr), *Niṣpannayogāvalī of Mahāpandita Abhayakaragupta*, Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1949.

¹¹⁹ The two texts were published as B. Bhattacharyya (ed and tr), *Two Vajrayāna Works*, Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1929.

¹²⁰ T. Ganapati Sastri (ed), *The Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa*, Trivandrum: The Superintendent Government Press, 1920. Mercelle Lalou, *Iconographie des Etoffes Peintes (pata) dans le Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa*, Paris: Buddhica, Series- I, vol. 6, 1930. Ariane Macdonald, *Le Mandala du Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa*, Paris: Adrien-Maisonneuve, 1962.

¹²¹ Mario. E. Carelli, *Sekoddeśatikā of Nādapāda (Nāropā): Being a Commentary of the Sekoddeśa Section of the Kalacakra Tantra*, Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1941.

¹²² David Snellgrove (ed and tr), *The Hevajra Tantra: A Critical Study*, London: Oxford University Press, 1959.

¹²³ David B. Grey (ed and tr), *The Cakrasamvaratantra (The Discourse of Sri Heruka): A Study and Annotated Translation*, New York: The American Institute of Buddhist Studies, 2007.

¹²⁴ Christian K. Wedemeyer (tr and ed), *The Lamp for Integrating the Practices: Caryāmelāpakapradīpa by Aryadeva, The Gradual Path of Vajrayana Buddhism*, New York: The American Institute of Buddhist Studies, 2007.

¹²⁵ Rajendralal Mitra, *Sanskrit Buddhist Literature of Nepal*, Calcutta: Sanskrit Pustak Bhandar, 1882, pp. 257-260.

has focused on four different aspects - the aspects of the overall philosophical affairs of tantra, its particular manifestation in Bengal, studies in the archaeology of Buddhist monuments, and studies in Buddhist images.

(a) *The studies in the textual and philosophical aspect*

The huge potential of the field was first brought to the notice of academia by Benoytosh Bhattacharyya, a fine scholar of Sanskrit language. He started editing and publishing the Tantric texts like *Sādhanamālā* (volume I in 1925 and volume II in 1927), *Prajñāpayaviniścayasiddhi* and *Jñāsiddhi* under the title of “Two Vajrayāna Work” (1929), *Guhyasamājatantra* (1931), *Niṣpannayogāvalī* (1949) from Oriental Institute of Baroda. While editing the texts Bhattacharyya gathered extensive knowledge about Tantric culture reflected in them which he utilized to understand the evolution of the cult. Bhattacharyya deals with its prescribed form in different texts like *Mañjuśrīmulakalpa*, *Guhyasamājatantra*, *Niṣpannayogāvalī* and *Sādhanāmālā* and constituted his discourse on the theological evolution and practice of Tantric Buddhism. According to him the earliest trace of Tantra can be found in the time of Buddha who recognized *ṛddhi* or super natural power and mentioned four *iddhipādas*¹²⁶ conducive to the attainment of supernatural power. He has suggested that the factor responsible for the development of magic and mysticism in Buddhism were – a) enforcement of strict discipline among the monks, b) the gradual changes in the conception of emancipation in the different schools of Buddhism, c) the enormous growth of Buddhist literature and d) the introduction of altruistic philosophy of Mahāyāna etc.¹²⁷ He argued that the rise of extreme heretical tendencies in the Vajrayāna Buddhism ultimately led to its decline.

Nurturing the metaphysical basis of the Tantra further continued with the study by Shashi Bhusan Dasgupta.¹²⁸ Dasgupta has mainly conducted textual studies and sought to find whether the rise of Tantra can be attributed to the loosely defined Mahāyānic practice of 8th century CE or in other minor forms. He has discussed extensively several schools of Tantric Buddhism like Kālacakrayāna, Sahajayāna, Nāthism etc. and then like Bhattacharyya drew the philosophical roots of Tantra from the later Mahāyāna schools like Mādhyamaka and Yogācāravāda.¹²⁹ He also argues that the basic tenet of Tantric Buddhism was imbued with the

¹²⁶ The four *iddhipādas* - *chando*, *viriyam*, *cittam* and *vimainsa* have been cited by B. Bhattacharyya from the *Dictionary of Pali language* by R.C. Childers in ‘Tantrika Cultures Among the Buddhist’ in *Ramkrishna Mission Studies on Tantra*.

¹²⁷ Bhattacharyya, *An Introduction to the Buddhist Esotericism*, 1989 (Reprint), p. 25

¹²⁸ Dasgupta, *Obscure Religious Cult*, p. 32

¹²⁹ Dasgupta, *An Introduction to Tantric Buddhism*, p. 98-105

conceptualization of Prajñā and Upāya, representing the female and male entity respectively within a human being and their union.

The quest to find the origin of Tantra was then carried on by Chintaharan Chakravarti.¹³⁰ Chakravarti argues that Tantra originated among the low class non-Aryan people and gradually appropriated by the Buddhist and the Hindus.¹³¹ He even suggested that Tantrism was present in the Atharva Veda, Dharmaśāstra, Purāṇas and Buddhist and Jain literature.¹³² As far as Buddhist Tantra is concerned, Chakravarti argues that the beginning can be placed in the first century CE. According to him the Dhāraṇīs may be looked upon as the precursor of Tantras and the Suramgama-Sūtra mentioned by Faxian contained the most complete list of dhāraṇīs.¹³³ He also argues that Tantra was known and magical power was possessed by the Buddhist monks who had attained Nirvāṇa but they always kept it in secret as Buddha did not sanction the exhibition of such power in public sphere. But later this cult came to the fore and magical and mystic power gained validation to be openly practiced. P.C. Bagchi also argues that “Tantras emerged out of the Vedic religion and were then developed as a distinct type of esoteric knowledge.”¹³⁴ He placed the origin of Buddhist Tantra in the 7th century CE and traced the philosophical roots of Tantra in the Mādhyamaka and Yogācāra school of Buddhism.¹³⁵ It has also been argued by P.C. Bagchi that Buddhist Tantra is an import from China. The foreign elements in Tantra have been brought to the light by P.C. Bagchi after analyzing the Kubjikā Tantra, Sammoha Tantra and Sādhanāmālā. P.C. Bagchi argues that Cīna-Tārā came from Mahācīna or China and that the goddess is identical to Buddhist deity Ekajaṭā discovered by Siddhā Nāgārjuna in the country of Bhota.¹³⁶ Vajrayāna Buddhism has generally been conceptualized as a later variant of Mahāyāna but some of its notion and rituals had hardly any affinity with the tenets of basic Mahāyāna Buddhism. This divergence might indicate the influence of a magical, psychic and ritualistic cult that was becoming prominent in this period and mainstream religious foundations responded to it with an assimilative orientation.

¹³⁰ Chintaharan Chakravarti, *The Tantras: Studies on Their Religion and Literature*, Calcutta: Punthi Pustak, 1963

¹³¹ *Ibid*, p. 45

¹³² *Ibid*, p. 10-17

¹³³ Chintaharan Chakravarti, “A Note on the Age and Authorship of Tantra,” in *Journal of Asiatic Society of Bengal*, New Series, Vol- XXIX, 1933, p. 75

¹³⁴ Prabodh Chandra Bagchi, “Evolution of the Tantras,” in *Ramakrishna Mission Studies on the Tantras*, Calcutta, 1989, p. 9

¹³⁵ *Ibid*, p. 16

¹³⁶ P.C. Bagchi, “On Foreign Element in Tantra,” in *Indian Historical Quarterly*, Vol-7, No. 1, 1931, p. 2.

Both Bhattacharyya and Dasgupta have endeavoured to link the tenets of Tantrism with the concept of Sūnya formulated by the Mādhyamaka and Yogācāra schools. The primary goal of the Sādhana in Tantric Buddhism was realizing the true nature of Sūnya but at the same time the rise of new deities like Heruka, Kurukullā, Vajravārāhī etc. and the rituals involving sex and peculiar eating habit can hardly be traced in any earlier Mahāyāna school. The Tantric practice has been envisaged by them as a discursive heretic theological discipline emerged in 6th or 7th century CE, ultimately leading to the overall degeneration of Buddhism. They have regarded the magical and mystical psychic practice as synonymous to Tantra and thus sought to trace its origin in every mystical practice and rituals that we come across from Veda or Dharmasāstra or Purāna. Chintaharan Chakravarti and P.C. Bagchi have looked at the magical practices in the Atharva Veda and tried to trace the origin of Tantra in them without assessing the early medieval context in which they emerged. Performance of magic and esoteric tendency is commonly found in every ancient culture but equating all of them uncritically involves some flaw. The metaphysical differences between the occult and their different socio-political background should also be evaluated to understand their exclusive nature.

S.C. Banerji in his study¹³⁷ on the Tantra in Bengal has noted that the Buddhist tantra had similar philosophical correspondence to the Hindu tantra. For example, the Buddhist ideas of *prajñā* and *upāya* were the Hindu counterpart of the Śiva and Śakti. Considering the date of composition of some of the early tantric Buddhist texts like *Guhyasamājatantra* and *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa*, Banerji argues that none of the Buddhist tantric text can be dated before 650 CE and therefore they were probably modelled after the Hindu tantra with a much earlier origin.¹³⁸ He is also of opinion that the homeland of tantra was situated in Bengal, Kashmir and Deccan as these regions produced some of the early tantric texts. The causes of composition of Tantra, he argues was that the Vedic rituals with rigorous discipline and meticulous power “failed to satisfy the craving of the people preoccupied with various worldly matter.”¹³⁹ Banerji’s work seeks to give a holistic picture of Tantra in Bengal including, Śaiva, Śākta, Vaiṣṇava and Buddhist tantra. He, however paid little attention to historically contextualize the Buddhist tantra and its literature in particular in the region of Bengal. His work is more focused on the key philosophical ideas of the different tantric school of Bengal, rather than its historical development. Thus, we note that earlier scholars like Banerji, Bhattacharyya, Dasgupta,

¹³⁷ S.C. Banerji, *Tantra in Bengal: A Study in its Origin, Development and Influence*, Kolkata: Naya Prakash, 1978.

¹³⁸ Ibid, p. 28.

¹³⁹ Ibid, p. 4.

Chakravarti and Bagchi were mostly engaged with the theoretical practice and evolution of Tantra and its different ritualistic characteristics. Little attention has been devoted on its social implication and the historical factors that have prepared the ground for Tantrism in Bengal.

More recently, Christian K. Wedemeyer and Geoffrey Samuels have made different approaches in the understanding of this obscure cult. Wedemeyer on the other hand has denounced all the previous efforts to analyze the Tantric Buddhism by Benoytosh Bhattacharyya, Shashi Bhusan Dasgupta and others by pointing out the flaw of understanding the nature of a religious phenomenon in terms of its origin.¹⁴⁰ He instead offers a fresh method to understand the phenomenon by using semiology as a methodological instrument. He argues that the antinomian behaviours found in the tantric literature should not be taken by their literal meaning.¹⁴¹ He observed that the ritual practices like eating flesh etc. which may be seen as transgressive behaviour, were designed to reject the established classical norms of Buddhism. These practices moreover were not preached by the marginal teacher, but by the learned Buddhist scholars of the early medieval *vihāras*.¹⁴² Such rituals were designed to challenge the ideas of scriptural Buddhism and by extension the Brahmanical *Dharmaśāstra* tradition. However, Wedemeyer's account failed to explain the historical situation in which the tantric writers felt the need to challenge both the established Buddhist norms and Brahmanical hegemony. He also did not address the early medieval socio-political situation, which needs to be reviewed within specific and given socio-political contexts and cannot be perceived as a common generic scene for the emergence of tantra. Considering the incorrect grammar and syntax encountered in many of the texts, scholars have also raised objection against placing these texts in an elite literary tradition. Therefore, there are grounds to review Wedemeyer's opinion.

Geoffrey Samuels's study focuses on the origin of Śaiva, Vaiṣṇava and Buddhist Tantra in general. He argues that the Buddhist *Maṇḍala* model was progressively adopted by the incorporation of the wild goddesses.¹⁴³ They were initially offered a place at the edges of the *Maṇḍala* as guardians and protectors but later they assumed as major figure as can be seen in the *Hevajra Maṇḍala*. He has suggested three phases of the development of the Tantric

¹⁴⁰ Christian K. Wedemeyer, *Making Sense of Tantric Buddhism; History, Semiology and the Transition in the Indian Traditions*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2013, p. 4

¹⁴¹ *Ibid*, 125.

¹⁴² *Ibid*, p. 177.

¹⁴³ Geoffrey Samuel, *The Origin of Yoga and Tantra; Indic Religion to the Thirteenth Century*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008, p. 262

Buddhism to show how the fierce deities gradually assumed principal place in a maṇḍala. In first phase (4th century CE) the fierce male deities like Vajrapāṇi and Yakṣa were identified and conceptualized. In the second phase (7th century CE) the basic five Tathāgata maṇḍalas are generally expanded in the texts of this period. The consort of the fierce deities (krodhaviḥnāntaka) found place in the secondary Maṇḍala of the principal deities (Bodhisattvas or Tathāgatas). In the third phase from the late tenth century CE the fierce deities started to appear with or without a female consort at the centre of the maṇḍala.

The recent studies have limited its scope to understand the theological evolution of tantric Buddhism by studying a few Sanskrit Buddhist texts. Very few have tried to investigate the relationship between the emergence of Tantra and the historical process as a background. Besides, little effort has been made to map the sacred space of tantric Buddhism on the basis of specific socio-cultural features. Recently, the texts like *Cakrasamvaratantra* and *Hevajratantra*¹⁴⁴ are being analysed to trace the root of Tantra in the light of Yoginī and Ḍākinī cult. Yet it is virtually impossible to understand the genesis of Tantra holistically by studying a few hagiographies or texts of iconography or method of worship. The huge pantheon along with a number of rituals and concepts like dhāraṇī and maṇḍala obfuscate any homogeneous understanding of a magical religious system like Tantric Buddhism. Rather, we can try to identify the social background which prepared the ground for the cultural exchange between different 'obscure religious cult' and mainstream religious orders, the result of which made Tantra becoming apparent.

(b) *The studies on tantrism in the context of South Asia and Bengal*

R.S. Sharma, the leading figure in the study of early medieval Indian society argues that setting up of Buddhist monastery in new areas has brought it in close connection with the aboriginals of the concerned area.¹⁴⁵ The aboriginals were assimilated in the Buddhist social order by the recognition of their non-Buddhist deities and rituals and thus Tantra became visible in contemporary religious orders. R.S. Sharma has emphasized on the land grant process as the central factor why tantra became prevalent in the major religious orders. He argues that the land grant to the Brahmanas and the Buddhist institutions paved the way for the rise of tantra by bringing them close to the aboriginals of the subcontinent outside of the

¹⁴⁴ D.L. Snellgrove (ed. and tr.), *The Hevajra Tantra*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959, pp. 12-18.

¹⁴⁵ R.S. Sharma, *Early Medieval Indian Society: A Study in Feudalisation*, New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2001, p. 245.

Madhyadeśa.¹⁴⁶ Sharma also noted that the institutional aspect of Tantrism was an integral part of the early medieval economic and social systems. The tantric maṭhas, temples and teachers were supported by land grants. This also inextricably foregrounded the rise of tantra in a feudal set up. The tantric monastic organization and the divine pantheons were modelled after the social and administrative hierarchy of the feudal system in the 8th century CE.¹⁴⁷ Being a Marxist historian R.S. Sharma has given overwhelming weightage to the economic and social factors responsible for the rise of tantra rather than the psycho-sexual and spiritual factors that have been attributed by some scholars as the main reason. Tantrism was deemed as a binary opposite of the Brahmanism and Sharma contends that tantrism travelled from outlying regions to Madhyadeśa through the brahmins. The social and religious adjustments made by the brahmanas in the outer regions was considered to have initiated a deviation from the orthodox path. In Magadha, Orissa, Bengal and Assam the existing Buddhist background gave rise to the Vajrayāna tantrism which accommodated new people and modified the hierarchical Mahāyāna Buddhism in favour of women and other lower order.

Niharranjan Roy also argues with the same tone that the lower strata of both Brahmanism and Buddhism were populated by the aboriginals who had kin-based/tribal society. The mainstream religious orders like Brahmanism and Buddhism adopted some of their beliefs and customs after filtering them according to their necessity.¹⁴⁸ B.N.S. Yadava also argued that the feudal character of early medieval India facilitated the spread of Tantrism while Tantric Buddhism, Tantric Śaivism and Tantric Śāktism had made the position of *varṇāśhramadharma* critical in Bengal and adjoining region.¹⁴⁹ Taking the cue from the non-conformist siddhācāryas of the Buddhist Sahajayāna, N.N. Bhattacharyya had also advocated for an aboriginal origin of tantra and argued that Tantric Buddhism was a religion of mass, deriving its constituent elements from the Lokāyata tradition.¹⁵⁰ By highlighting the low-caste origin of some of the Buddhist *Siddhācāryas*, Bhattacharyya argued that their religious ideas were characterized by the free-floating ideas of the lower order of the society. He however, uncritically accepted the fact that they envisioned the idea of śūnya from a different

¹⁴⁶ Sharma, *Early Medieval Indian Society*, p. 246.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid*, p. 250.

¹⁴⁸ Niharranjan Ray, *Bangaleer Itihas Aadi Parba* (in Bengali) [1949], Kolkata: Dey's Publishing, 2013, p. 529.

¹⁴⁹ B.N.S. Yadava, *Society and Culture in Northern India: In the Twelfth Century*, Allahabad: Central Book Depot, 1973, p. 380.

¹⁵⁰ N.N. Bhattacharyya, *History of the Tantric Religion*, p. 262-265.

perspective. Moreover, the early tantric epistemology delineated in the Sanskrit Buddhist texts signified the theological shaping of the tantric tenets from a high intellectual tradition.

The silence about the different reciprocal dynamics and cultural interactions between Buddhism and the aboriginal cults in the works of Sharma, Ray, and Yadava is inevitable as the sources on this matter are scanty and inadequate. However, by focusing on a common pattern of tantric processes from a social perspective these pioneers on early medieval Indian history have opened the windows to further possibilities for historical probes. Their narratives mostly seem to have emanated from the notion that the major religious orders in the early medieval society were going through a crisis due to which they came in contact with and absorbed several low cults and adopted elements from them. All the new ritualistic and theological features along with change and expansion in Buddhist pantheon were homogeneously asserted to be 'tantric' in nature. However, what was bracketed off as tantric contained complex ideas and cultic practices. Not all the early medieval grassroots mother goddess cults can be identified as tantric. The notion of tantra indeed was itself complex as discussed above.

B.D Chattopadhyaya on the other hand has critiqued the tendency to understand Tantra as proceeding from the 'degeneration' into which the Indian 'feudal society' had sunk. He argued that as far as appropriation and integration of a cult was concerned the process was not one of 'harmonious syncretism' but it came through the formation of a structure comprising heterogeneous cultic beliefs which were transformed in the process of fusion where some elements emerged as dominant, imparting new shape to the finally emerging cult.¹⁵¹ Chattopadhyaya contended that the religious practices in the post-classical context had their roots embedded in the pre-classical and classical phases. But they underwent such a complex process in terms of emergence of iconography and rituals that one is tempted to view the total situation as a 'process of segmentation.'¹⁵² However, these new phenomena continued to harbour the earlier and classical ideals of the religions in newer forms. In the instance of early medieval Buddhism in the given context for example, the different tiers of Vajrayāna or Mantrayāna deities which emerged distinctively, did continue to sustain the classical Buddhist ideas like karuṇā, śūnyata and maitrī. On the other hand, the contrary is noted if we draw a

¹⁵¹ B.D. Chattopadhyaya, *The Making of Early Medieval India* [1994], New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012, p. 31.

¹⁵² B.D. Chattopadhyaya, "Passages from the Classical towards the Medieval: Understanding the Indian Experience", in B.D. Chattopadhyaya, *The Making of Early Medieval India* [1994], New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012, p. lv.

comparison between early medieval Buddhism and Nātha developments. The Nātha preceptors like Matsyendranāth and Gorakṣanāth, despite having resemblance with the dhyānī-buddhas of Vajrayāna maintained their unique yogic practice and monastic and temple bases. At the same time the force of cultic rivalry between such emerging sects were also apparent and led to conspicuous projection of their divergence by the practitioners themselves. B.D. Chattopadhyaya had noted that by the means of affiliation and adherence, the different sectarian groups were looking for hegemony through textual propaganda and control of sacred sites.¹⁵³ Thus, he drew attention to the multiplicity of sectarianism and the kind of plural ethnic and religious co-existence that such developments indicated.¹⁵⁴ These historical approaches can be posed in the context of early medieval Bengal to understand the emergence of the complex cultic scene which saw efflorescence in the medieval period and thus help in situating Buddhist tantra within emerging matrices of religious practices and beliefs.

Writers of the general religious history of Buddhism in Bengal like Puspa Niyogi,¹⁵⁵ Gayatri Sen Majumdar,¹⁵⁶ and Rama Chatterjee¹⁵⁷ focused on the patronage of the imperial Pala rulers that has been instrumental in the resurrection of Buddhism in Bengal. They have focused on Buddhist antiquities including the stone and metal images and the Buddhist Vihāras. Sarita Khetry has outlined the characteristics of the history of Buddhism in Bengal from the earliest time to the 12th century CE.¹⁵⁸ She has pointed out that after the beginning of the Pāla regime, Mahāyāna Buddhism in Bengal gave birth to several schools like Vajrayāna, Kālacakrayāna and Sahajayāna. She has pointed out that the images of the Dhyānī Buddha in the Pāla sculpture were the most visible feature of Vajrayāna as they have been vividly described in the tantric Buddhist text Guhyasamājatantra. Though they have described Buddhism of the concerned period as Tantric and pointed out some general characteristics of magic and mysticism, they did not analyse either the root of this religious culture or several layers within it. Therefore, a need for microanalysis is required for understanding tantric Buddhism in Bengal in more comprehensive terms.

¹⁵³ B.D. Chattopadhyaya, "Passages from the Classical towards the Medieval", p. lvi.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid, p. lvii.

¹⁵⁵ Puspa Niyogi, *Buddhism in Ancient Bengal*, Kolkata: Jijnasa, 1980.

¹⁵⁶ Gayatri Sen Majumder, *Buddhism in Ancient Bengal*, Kolkata: Navana, 1983.

¹⁵⁷ Rama Chatterjee, *Religion in Bengal during the Pāla and Sena Times*, Kolkata: Punthi Pustak, p. 1985.

¹⁵⁸ Sarita Khetry, "Buddhism," in Abdul M. Chowdhury and Ranabir Chakravarti (eds), *History of Bangladesh: Early Bengal in Regional Perspective (up to c. 1200 CE)*, Vol. II, Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 2018, p. 306.

A lot of studies have focused on the cultural genesis of tantric Buddhism. Majority of the scholars are of opinion that it originated from a non-sectarian popular religious practice.¹⁵⁹ By the late 8th century CE, the Indian Buddhist authors began producing a genre of Tantric Buddhist scriptures which departed radically from the early Buddhist textual models and in these scriptures, we come across these esoteric practices. Some of the earliest Tantric texts like *Yoginītantra* deal with the rituals and method of worship of some deities like Heruka and Vajravārāhī whose metaphysical base was fundamentally different from the Mahāyāna Buddhism. The root of the Yoginī and Dākīnī cult, a typical character of Buddhism in the concerned period, has been traced by some scholars in the ancient Indic goddesses known as *mātr̥s*.¹⁶⁰ These *mātr̥s* were popular deities in ancient India whose identities and worship cannot be attributed to any single religious traditions like Buddhism or emergent theistic sects. The similarity of some early Buddhist Tantric texts with Śaiva Tantra has been highlighted by some recent studies which claim that the former was heavily influenced by the latter.¹⁶¹ The *Hevajratantra* and *Cakrasamvaratantra* which refers to itself at the end of its each chapter as the discourse of Sri Heruka (Sriherukābhīdhana), argues Sanderson, that they are much similar to the Śaiva Tantric texts like *Vidyāpīṭha*, *Jayadrathayāmala Tantra*, the *Picumata*, the *Tantrasadbhavātāntra* and *Siddhayogeśvarīmātā* and they have adopted the rituals therein.¹⁶² David Gray also agrees with Sanderson regarding the texts' Śaiva roots and argues that they have composed by the quasi-heretical sect called the Kāpālikas.¹⁶³ Gray further pointed out that *Cakrasamvaratantra* in its initial stage of development was composed outside the “normative monastic Buddhist institutional settings.” Johannes Bronkrost also argued in the same line that Buddhism in the early medieval period was being increasingly brahmanized.¹⁶⁴ Both Sanderson and Bronkrost have been challenged by Ronald Davidson who argues that this is a problematic reasoning of textual transmission.¹⁶⁵

¹⁵⁹ David Gray, ‘The Cakrasamvara Tantra: Its History and Interpretation’, in *Religion Compass*, 1/6, 2007, p. 701

¹⁶⁰ Shamam Hatley, “Converting the Dakīnī: Goddess Cults and Tantras of the Yoginis Between Buddhism and Saivism”, in David Gray and Ryan Richard Overbey (eds), *Tantric Traditions in Transmissions and Translations*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2016, p. 3.

¹⁶¹ Alexis Sanderson, ‘Vajrayāna: Origin and Function’, in *Proceedings: ‘Buddhism into the year 2000’*, p. 92

¹⁶² Sanderson, *Ibid*, p. 88.

¹⁶³ David Gray, “The Cakrasamvara Tantra: Its History and Interpretation”, p. 700

¹⁶⁴ Johannes Bronkrost, *Buddhism in the Shadow of Brahmanism*, Leiden: Brill, 2011.

¹⁶⁵ Ronald M Davidson, “Esoteric Buddhism in the Matrix of Early Medieval India”, in Abhishek S. Amar et al. (eds), *On the Regional Development of Early Medieval Buddhist Monasteries in South Asia*, The Centre for South Asian Studies, Ryukoku University, 2021, pp. 5-9

The significant study in the Indian esoteric Buddhism by Ronald M. Davidson argued that Buddhist esoterism of the 7th century CE was a result of increasing adoption of the early medieval feudal power structure in the sacred ideas of Buddhism.¹⁶⁶ The subtle account of Davidson recognized the fact that the proto-Tantric ritual and meditative elements were already there in the Buddhist religious arena before 7th century CE. It only became apparent and crystalized in the context of early medieval complex matrix of political, social and economic factors. According to Davidson the basic political structure in the early medieval period can be called *sāmanta-feudalism* which was characterized by a changing subordinated relation between the core and peripheral areas in the subcontinent. The different tantric practices indicated a new Buddhist language where early medieval metaphor of assuming kingship was adopted in the *abhiṣeka* ceremony where the new initiates ended up being the *cakravartī* or *rājādhirāja* in the *maṇḍala*. The master-disciple relationship too, Davidson contends, was replicating the consecration process of the king.

For the Buddhist institutions the situation was challenging in the sense that it lost its symbiotic relationship with the erstwhile tradesmen and merchants. With the fall of the Guptas, the guilds were destabilized and the dominant trade routes shifted to the central Asia. Under the new circumstances, the Buddhist institutions were leaning towards the political powers in the different peripheral regions as they were controlling the resource base.¹⁶⁷ This is somewhat apparent from the early epigraphic records in the 6th – 7th centuries. Substantial epigraphic evidence recording the land grants to the Buddhist *vihāras* can be furnished till the 9th centuries CE. The Jagajjivanpur Copperplate of Mahendrapāla, Indian Museum Copperplate of Dharmapāla and Nālandā Copperplate of Devpāla are a few to mention.¹⁶⁸ However, we note that such links with the statal powers become less evident in later centuries in greater Bengal. Indeed, it is difficult to draw conclusion about steady and solid patronage from either the state or the community directly from epigraphic sources for the later centuries. Therefore, the resilience of Buddhist tantra in our context has to be explored in a different light. The huge number of physical remnants in the nature of *vihāras* and images throughout the select region present us with significant proof for popularity and sustenance of the religion up to the 11th century and in a lesser degree till the beginning of the 13th century.

¹⁶⁶ Ronald M. Davidson, *Indian Esoteric Buddhism: A Social History of Tantric Movement*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2002, pp. 160-65.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid*, p. 62.

¹⁶⁸ Ryosuke Furui, “Buddhist *Vihāras* in Early Medieval Bengal: Organizational Development and Historical Context,” in *Buddhism Law and Society*, Vol. 7, 2021-22, pp. 99-142.

(c) *Studies in the archaeology of the Buddhist monuments in Bengal*

Archaeological findings form a major resource for this research and the reports as well as analyses of field findings and images comprise the primary sources for this work. Extensive survey work on the Buddhist monuments of India by Debala Mitra constitute the primary sources for this research. Her work covered a wide range of Buddhist stupas, shrines, and vihāras all over India since ancient times and the select area of this study also formed a part of findings. Mitra quite early brought into focus the antiquities like the Hevajra-Śakti image of Paharpur¹⁶⁹ and *dhāraṇī* tablets of Mainamati¹⁷⁰ and indicated the presence of tantric Buddhism at these sites. Her work in many ways paved the way to understanding Buddhism in Bengal. Other such field reports have been discussed in the section on primary sources.

A few scholars have thrown light on the history and social processes around the Vihāras in the given area. Among them notable are Umakant Misra, B.N. Prasad, Ryosuke Furui and Suchandra Ghosh. Umakant Mishra has focused on the *Caryā* or Yogā Tantra-based landscape of Buddhist *vihāras* is noticed in Udaygiri, Ratnagiri, and Lalitgiri of early medieval Orissa.¹⁷¹ By suggesting that these were *maṇḍalavihāra*, he argued that the insertion of *dharmā cetiya* such as *pratitya-samutpadadhāraṇī* and *vimaloṣṇīśadhāraṇī* is the typical feature of this tantric landscape. From the 7th century CE onwards, these *dhāraṇīs* substituted the body relic and became the symbol of Tathagata centering on which a stupa can be made.¹⁷² In the 8th century CE, the construction of a stupa in the Udaygiri area was modelled on *garbhadhātumaṇḍala* of *Mahāvairocana Sūtra*. The structural activities throughout this period also bear the evidence of restricted access to the public as the number of votive stupas is significantly less, which Umakant Mishra argues is due to the tantra-based landscape. This proposition might be reviewed in the light of early medieval Buddhist vihāras of Bengal as the central shrine of the Paharpur monastery also has been identified as symbolically representing *garvadhātumaṇḍala*.¹⁷³

B.N. Prasad has argued after examining the dedicatory inscriptions of the Buddhist sites like Kurkihar, Vikramśīlā, and Bodh Gaya, that the monks as well as the lay followers belonged

¹⁶⁹ Debala Mitra, *Buddhist Monuments*, Calcutta: Sahitya Samsad, 1971, p. 240

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid*, p. 246.

¹⁷¹ Umakant Mishra, 'Continuity and Change in the Sacred Landscape of the Buddhist Sites of Udaygiri, Odisha', in Himanshu Prabha Ray (ed.), *Negotiating Cultural Identity*, New Delhi: Routledge, 2016, p. 231.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 245.

¹⁷³ Swadhin Sen, 'Paharpur', in Abdul Momin Chowdhuri and Ranabir Chakravarti, *History of Bangladesh*, Vol. I, Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 2019, p. 359.

to the Mahāyāna creed. For example, the title *paramopāsaka* and *paramopāsikā* signified a layman and a woman respectively who were Mahāyāna worshippers, while *śākyabhikṣu* and *śākyabhikṣuni* signified a monk and nun affiliated to Mahāyāna Buddhism.¹⁷⁴ However, the sites also produced images of Siddhāikavira, Vagiśvara, Parnaśabarī, Vasudhārā, and Hārītī, meant to fulfil the mundane (*laukika*) need. These *laukika* deities were incorporated into the orbit of Vajrayāna/tantric Buddhism later, as attested by the Buddhist text *Sādhanamālā*. Therefore, in the context of the contemporary textual reference to these deities, the monastic centers must be reviewed from different perspectives.

Based upon the epigraphic evidence of the early medieval Buddhist viharās, Ryosuke Furui has done an excellent study of the organizational base of the Buddhist monastic institutions.¹⁷⁵ He has argued that from the sixth century CE till the 10th century CE the Buddhist viharās consolidated their material base by accumulation of landholdings. Yijing’s record also offers us insight into the administrative organization of the Buddhist viharā and the reverence for the Vinaya norms. The early medieval viharās of Bengal were also a part of the local power relations and agrarian economy. Their heavy dependence on the temporal power was essential for their flourishing and the loss of political patronage led to a weaker organizational base. Suchandra Ghosh has shown that the basic nature of the patronage pattern was not only religious in nature but was greatly political, creating a network of complex power relation. In the case of the monasteries of eastern India she has pointed out four principal groups of patrons or benefactors viz. (a) the rulers and their families, (b) the subordinate rulers or officials, (c) the eminent monks of the monastic communities and the (d) laities.¹⁷⁶

The studies on the Buddhist viharās have mostly focused on the archaeological and antiquarian evidence with emphasis on the patronage base of the viharās. The epigraphical evidence has been emphasised to cull out the complex relationship of the Buddhist viharās with the agrarian economy, local power relation and material base. Juxtaposing the archaeological evidence with the academic practice and the tradition created by the community of Buddhist scholars may provide us further ground to investigate their tantric significance. The textual

¹⁷⁴ Birendra Nath Prasad, *Rethinking Bihar, and Bengal: History, Culture and Religion*, New Delhi: Manohar, 2022 (Reprint), p. 98.

¹⁷⁵ Ryosuke Furui, “Buddhist *Vihāras* in Early Medieval Bengal: Organizational Development and Historical Context,” in *Buddhism Law and Society*, Vol. 7, 2021-22, pp. 99-142.

¹⁷⁶ Suchandra Ghosh, ‘Patronage of Buddhist Monasteries in Eastern India (600-1300 CE)’, Oxford Research Encyclopaedia, 2022, accessed from <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.013.811>

record of the early medieval Buddhist vihāra, especially in the Tibetan record may aid us in contextualizing the vihāras in a broader sacred tantric landscape.

(b) *The studies in the images of tantric Buddhism*

The study of the Tantric Buddhist images has been overwhelmingly occupied by the quest to learn the iconographic details and to understand the artistic pattern. The first such endeavour came from the first curator of Indian Museum John Anderson¹⁷⁷ and then from Theodor Bloch.¹⁷⁸ Both of them presented a rough account of the Buddhist images of Indian Museum, hardly discussing the sculptures in historical manner. They also did not mention the distinctive school of Pāla art as an overarching feature of these images. In 1919 Radha Govinda Basak and Dinesh Chandra Bhattacharya published a book covering the images of the Varendra Research society.¹⁷⁹ But this again appeared to be a very isolated work failing to contextualize the images within the broader spectrum of artistic style and regional feature. The next significant work came from Nalini Kanta Bhattasali, the curator of Dhaka Museum in 1929.¹⁸⁰ Bhattasali for the first time made an effort to accord the images with the iconography prescribed in the *Sādhannmālā* (for this task he depended on the work of Foucher) and also provided short introduction to the role of gods and goddess in Buddhist pantheon before discussing the sculpture. Bhattasali's work therefore is a wonderful combination of literary and archaeological source. But Huntington argues that he neglected the relationship with the contemporaneous school of art flourishing in Nālandā and Bodh Gaya.¹⁸¹ The metal and stone sculpture belonging to the Pāla-Sena period in Bihar and Bengal have been extensively reviewed by Huntington who showed distinctive markers in their chronological development, regional and local trends, and sectarian preferences. She concluded that the artistic centres shifted from western to eastern Bengal as time progressed and the abundance of Brahmanical images gradually replaced the number of Buddhist images portraying the former's domination in artistic medium.¹⁸²

¹⁷⁷ John Anderson, *Catalogue and Handbook of Archaeological Collection of the Indian Museum*, 2 vols. Calcutta: Trustees of the Indian Museum, 1882-83.

¹⁷⁸ Theodor Bloch, *Supplementary Catalogue of the Archaeological Collections of the Indian Museum* Calcutta: Baptist Mission Press, 1911.

¹⁷⁹ R.G. Basak and Dinesh Chandra Bhattacharya, *A Catalogue of the Archaeological Relics in the Museum of the Varendra Research Society*, Rajshahi, Varendra Research Society, 1919.

¹⁸⁰ Nalini Kanta Bhattasali, *Iconography of Buddhist and Brahmanical Sculptures in the Dacca Museum*, Dhaka, 1929

¹⁸¹ Susan L. Huntington, *Pāla-Sena School of Sculpture*, Leiden: Brill, 1984, p. 2

¹⁸² *Ibid*, p. 201.

Stella Kramrisch¹⁸³ added significant contribution to the field by exploring Pāla and Sena sculpture but did not establish a chronological basis upon which Pāla and Sena period can be dated. Rakhil Das Banerjee¹⁸⁴ also devoted a significant amount of research in the field during 1930s. But like Bhattasali, he too depended on the palaeographic sources for the dating of the images. It is to be mentioned that the inscriptions on the images are not necessarily incised at the time of curving the sculpture and might appear on them later. The older works on this field is therefore limited by the method of conventional dating and the limitation has been sought to resolve in the work by Huntington and others.

Debala Mitra was the pioneer scholar who contributed to the study of the Buddhist bronze images found from the Jhewari area of Chittagong.¹⁸⁵ Mitra has surveyed about 61 bronze images along with other antiquarian remains to shed light on the kind of Buddhist culture that flourished in the Chittagong area. Apart from studying the iconographies of the images she has historicized them in the Buddhist past of Chittagong in the light of the Tibetan records, narrative of Lama Tāranātha and S.C. Das. She alluded to Taranatha's account to show that Chittagong came under the rule of Govindachandra and Vimalachandra who were converted by *siddha* Jalandhari pā and Krsnācārya. Her study brought to the fore the diverse corpus of Buddhist images especially of the Dhyanī Buddha Akṣobhya, Amitābha, Vairocana, and Ratnasambhava. She also noted the features of Vasudhārā, Jambhala and Tārā. Her study greatly influenced many of the later studies on the Buddhist art of early medieval Bengal.

S.K. Saraswati undertook a venture to throw light on the *Tantrayāna* art by describing the stylistic differences between the iconographies of various images.¹⁸⁶ He was the first scholar to specifically term the Buddhist art of the Pāla-Sena period as *Tantrayāna* art. He has observed that the rise of Tantra in eastern India was coinciding with the Eastern India School of Art (8th – 12th centuries) and argued that the school gave an impetus to the flourishing of *Tantrayāna* Art.¹⁸⁷ His concept of tantric Buddhist art was primarily shaped by the iconographical description, family wise division and ritualistic worship methods of the Buddhist deities as prescribed in the Sanskrit Buddhist texts of early medieval India like *Āryamañjuśrīmūlakalpa*, *Guhyasamāja Tantra*, *Hevajra Tantra* etc. He has shown that the

¹⁸³ Stella Kramrisch, *Pāla and Sena Sculpture*, Rupam, XL (October, 1929), 107-26

¹⁸⁴ Rakhil Das Banerjee, *Eastern Indian School of Medieval Sculpture*, ASI, XLVII (Delhi, 1933)

¹⁸⁵ Debala Mitra, *Bronzes from Bangladesh: a study of Buddhist images from District Chittagong*, Delhi: Agam Kala Prakashan, 1982, p. 15.

¹⁸⁶ S.K. Saraswati, *Tantrayāna Art: An Album*, Kolkata: The Asiatic Society, 1977.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid*, p, III-XI.

various forms of the Bodhisattva figures like Mañjuśrī and Avalokiteśvara appearing in the sculptural horizon of Bengal and North India actually indicated their tantric attributes. For example, different forms of Mañjuśrī like Vāk, Vāgiśvara, Arapacana and Siddhaikavira were aggravating as the Tantrayāna form of the deity was being dominant.

Gouriswar Bhattacharya extensively surveyed many Buddhist images of early medieval Bengal and pointed out their artistic idioms. He, in most cases explained the complex iconography of specific images like Pañcatathāgata,¹⁸⁸ Pretasantarpita-Lokeśvara,¹⁸⁹ Buddha Śākyamuni¹⁹⁰ and Vajrapāṇi¹⁹¹ by matching their iconographical description in Sādhanamālā and Niṣpannayogāvalī. He underlined the tantric significance of the Buddhist images of early medieval Bengal by noticing their special artistic form in specific regions. His studies are mostly devoted to the explanation of the complex iconographical details. He has shown that the division of the whole Buddhist pantheon among the five families of Pañcatathāgatas was the key feature of the tantric Buddhist art.

Recently, Claudine Bautze-Picron and GJR Mevissen have endeavored to conduct micro analysis of the massive corpus of Buddhist images in terms of their regional specificities, production and transportation. Mevissen particularly focused on the curious presence of the Astral deities like graha and dikpāla in the sacred Buddhist sites.¹⁹² Simultaneously he also devoted his studies in bearing out the iconographical implication of specific deities like Mārīcī¹⁹³ and Mahāpratisarā.¹⁹⁴ Bautze-Picron has argued that the centre of the mass production of Buddhist stone sculpture was based in Kurkihar, while the production of the

¹⁸⁸ Gouriswar Bhattacharya, "Buddha Śākyamuni and Pañca-tathāgatas: Dilemma in Bihar-Bengal," in Karen Frifelt and Per Sorensen (eds), *South Asian Archaeology 1985: Papers from the Eighth International Conference of South Asian Archaeologists in Western Europe, held at Moesgaard Museum, 1-5 July, 1985*, London: Curzon Press, 1985, pp. 350-371.

¹⁸⁹ Gouriswar Bhattacharya, "Pretasantarpita-Lokeśvara," *Journal of Bengal Art*, Vol. 6, 2001, pp. 21-44.

¹⁹⁰ Gouriswar Bhattacharya, "Buddha Śākyamuni under the Mango Tree," *Oriental Art*, Vol. 36.1, pp. 31-34.

¹⁹¹ Gouriswar Bhattacharya, "The Buddhist deity Vajrapāṇi," *Silk Road Art and Archaeology*, Vol. 4, 1995-96, pp. 323-354.

¹⁹² GJR Mevissen, "Images of Buddhist Goddesses Accompanied by Astral Deities," in Gouriswar Bhattacharya (ed), *Studies in Art, Iconography, Architecture and Archaeology of India and Bangladesh: Professor Enamul Haque Felicitation Volume*, New Delhi: Kaveri Books, 2007.

¹⁹³ GJR Mevissen, "Two Unpublished Mārīcī Sculpture in the Khulna Museum, Bangladesh, and Related Images from Mainamati," Devangana Desai and Arundhati Banerji (eds), *Kaladarpan: The Mirror of Indian Art, Essays in memory of Shri Krishna Deva*, New Delhi: Aryan Book International, 2009, pp. 273-284.

¹⁹⁴ GJR Mevissen, "Images of Mahāpratisarā in Bengal: Their Iconographic Links with Javanese, Central Asian and East Asian Images," *Journal of Bengal Art*, Vol. 4, 1999, pp. 99-129.

metal sculpture was based in Mainamati region of Comilla district, Bangladesh.¹⁹⁵ The images after being produced were transported and circulated in large number not only within Bengal region but also outside in Suvarnavdipa and Arakan. Overwhelming emphasis on the iconographic details has limited the scope of their study in the social and anthropological context. She has also shown that Buddhist images of devotion and power emerged at a juncture when Bengal formed a network of transmission with Myanmar and Java.¹⁹⁶ The cult of specific Buddhist deities of power and protection, especially of Mahakala and Yamantaka, became a ubiquitous phenomenon in the medieval kingdoms of Southeast Asia and Tibet.

Research Question

The previous studies, focusing on the philosophical and artistic aspects of the tantric Buddhism has paid little attention to its historical development. A significant research gap may be noted in juxtaposing the literary and material evidence together to understand the tantric Buddhism holistically. A few works highlighting on the historical aspect have been done in the broader context of the sub-continent, often talking about the different tantric orders like Śaiva, Śākta, Vaiṣṇava and Buddhist as a whole. The specificity of tantric Buddhism in early medieval Bengal, which was situated in a cultural crossroads, requires further investigation to trace out the distinct characteristic trends of the enigmatic cult. The region-specific study of tantric Buddhism may also facilitate the understanding of the processes of dissemination and track the nature of interactions between the elements of tantric Buddhism in the South, Southeast, East and Central Asia. Therefore, the scope for analysing the historical development of Tantric Buddhism in the specific context of early medieval Bengal emerges from the survey of the secondary literature.

Any enquiry into the origin and development of Tantric Buddhism in early medieval Bengal from 6th – 12th centuries essentially encompass a plethora of historical issues. We shall track the origin of tantric Buddhism from two aspects. Firstly, we shall focus on the spatial origin from the point of view of the early precursor of tantric Buddhism appearing in different geographical locations and their linkages with early medieval Bengal. Secondly, we shall track its theological roots in the Mahāyāna sūtra literature and its reflection and modification in the

¹⁹⁵ Claudine Bautze-Picron, “Moving Images Between Bihar and Bengal in the Ninth and Tenth Centuries,” in *Pratnatattva*, Vol. 22, June, 2016, pp. 85-91.

¹⁹⁶ Claudine Bautze-Picron, “Images of Devotion and Power in South and Southeast Bengal,” in Andrea Acri (ed), *Esoteric Buddhism in Medieval Maritime Asia*, Singapore: ISEAS Press, 2016, p. 164.

textual and material culture of early medieval Bengal. Here, we shall look into whether the different sources of Tantric Buddhism in early medieval Bengal like text, sculptures, paintings and remains of the vihāra, bear out the varied layers of Tantric Buddhism. The present research will try to address the problem of tracing the origin and development of tantric Buddhism in comprehensive terms, particularly in the spacio-temporal context of Bengal.

Even within the region of Bengal, a complex enigmatic religious culture like tantric Buddhism showed some contradictory idealistic trends and contesting situations. The supposed paradox of the orthodox and non-conformist ideas, both being projected by the Buddhist *siddhācāryas* in different texts possess one of the greatest conundrums of the subject. Similarly, the resident monks of the Buddhist vihāras, writing about the antinomian abhiṣeka rituals involving sex also leaves ground for scepticism regarding the observance of the Vinaya rule in the monastery. Moreover, one may also wonder about the compatibility of the peculiar esoteric practices prescribed in the texts with the Buddhist normative ideas of asceticism. Further enquiry is also required to understand in what context did the abstract idea of Nāgārjuna was juxtaposed with the tantric meditative and ritualistic practices. The present research is devoted to understanding how in the context of cultural interaction in early medieval Bengal, can we situate the rise of a host of cults within Buddhism. Simultaneously, we will also enquire into the development of the tantric Buddhism by the strategic co-option of heterogenous cult prevailing outside the purview of monastic Buddhism. We shall also investigate whether the different layers of tantric Buddhism like Vajrayāna, Mantrayāna, Kālacakrayāna and Sahajayāna were existing simultaneously under any common influence.

The research primarily deals with the problem of tracing the origin of the Buddhist esoteric cults within the broader spectrum of tantra in early medieval Bengal like *Śaiva* and *Śākta*. We have tried to understand how the different characteristics of tantric Buddhism were intermingling with the erstwhile Mahāyāna ideas. Could we safely assign the entire rise of tantric elements to the peripheral/marginal cults or there was already a long tradition of vajra-based ideas in early Buddhism that gradually took the form of Vajrayāna and *Mantrayāna* under specific circumstances? We have also endeavoured to answer the question of the gradual disappearance of tantric Buddhism from Bengal and whether it came to be absorbed into the mystical trends of *Śākta*, Baul, or Islamic Sufi.

In what ways the early medieval Buddhist vihāra of Bengal and Bihar like Mainamati, Jagajjivanpur, Nālandā, Vikramśīlā, Odantapurī, Sompura, and Jagaddala can be

contextualized in contemporary tantric Buddhism? If the material remains of the vihāras and their architectural pattern speak for any correspondence with the Tantric Buddhist ideas. Looking beyond the material culture of the Buddhist vihāras and taking into account their cultural depiction in the texts may provide a ground to speculate their tantric implications.¹⁹⁷ Whether we can identify the specific cultural zone of Tantric Buddhism by mapping the provenance of the Buddhist images? To what extent can we consider the specific iconographical markers of certain Buddhist deities as tantric? What were the ritual and social implications of the compassionate bodhisattva figures like Akṣobhya, Avalokiteśvara, and different forms of Tārā as well as the demonic wrathful deities like Heruka, Yamāntaka, Paṇṣāvārī, Jāngulī, and Kurukuallā? Does the particular mundane purpose of the *laukika* deities like anti-epidemic, protector of the stūpa, destroyer of the enemy, etc. indicate the social anxiety that tantric Buddhism was attempting to address?

Survey of the Primary Sources

In the present study, for the purpose of understanding the emergence and development of Tantric Buddhism in early medieval Bengal, we have taken into account a range of primary sources like a few Sanskrit and vernacular Buddhist texts from the region concerned as well as the archaeological evidence like Buddhist images, paintings and excavated remains of the Buddhist vihāras. The primary literary sources might be divided into two categories for the purpose of the understanding the layers of tantric development in Buddhism. On the one hand there were travelogues by the Chinese pilgrims like Xuanzang (7th century CE), Yijing (8th century), Sheng-chi (8th century CE) and Lama Tāranātha (1608 CE) who recorded their first-hand experience or facts they came to know from the contemporary sources. On the other hand, there were several tantric Buddhist texts and anthologies composed anonymously or by reputed Buddhist scholars from early medieval Bengal. The Chinese travelers visiting to the different sub-regions of Bengal in different times left a vivid description of the Buddhist culture and practice thereof. By considering their records we might understand the monastic culture of Buddhism and identify the overall condition of Buddhism in different subregions of Bengal during 7th – 8th centuries.

The huge corpus of tantric Buddhist texts that can be dated roughly from 7th century CE onwards and can be presumably placed in eastern India are mostly known from the Tibetan

¹⁹⁷ The academic culture of the Buddhist vihara has been worked upon by a few scholars. For details see Hartmut Scharfe, *Education in Ancient India*, Leiden: Brill, 2020.

catalogue *Bstan-gyur*. It is the second collection of Buddhist tantra in Tibet, along with *Bka-gyur* which is the first collection containing *Buddha Vacana* or canonical texts.¹⁹⁸ Though originally written in Hybrid Buddhist Sanskrit these texts are mostly lost in their original form and can be retrieved along with their numerous commentaries from Tibetan corpus. On the basis of the esoteric doctrines, rites and practices in a hybridized language, the whole body of Sanskrit Buddhist literature is divided into two groups: *Rgyud* or Tantra and *Mdo* or Buddhist Sūtra. Among the rgyud or Tantra category itself the texts deal with a varied number of matters like *stotras*, *sangītī*, *mudrā*, *maṇḍala*, *dhāraṇī* and *mantras* of Tārā, Avalokiteśvara, Mañjuśrī and other deities of Buddhist pantheon, Sādhanās or worship method of esoteric devotion, doctrines and practices etc. Apart from the Tibetan *Bstan-guyr*, mention of the tantric authors and their writings and practices could be also found in *Pag Sam Jon Zang* (18th century) by Sumpa Mkhanpo and Tāranātha's (16th century) account.¹⁹⁹ A glance at the *Rgyud* or Tantra section of *Bstan-gyur* shows that varied and large number of Tantric texts were composed throughout the early medieval period. Most of the cults overlap in time period as well as in terms of doctrines and practice. The arrangement of Tibetan Tantra was done using a strategy called doxography.²⁰⁰ To avoid difficulties in identifying the Tantra they were arranged into a series of hierarchical order. There was a sharp distinction between the classification of Tantra in Indian and Tibetan tradition. While the Indian Buddhist Tantras during 8th to 12th centuries, were divided largely based on rituals, the Tibetan preferred organizing Tantras under different doctrines or philosophical schools.

The tantric Buddhist texts of early medieval Bengal under survey showed a mixture of diverse literary features like prose and verse. For example, *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa* and *Tārāmūlakalpa*, the two Kriyā tantra texts, were composed in both prose and verse. The language they used is known as hybrid Buddhist Sanskrit which was a mixture of Sanskrit and some form of middle-Indic language. The Sanskrit is sometimes unsophisticated and grammatically incorrect.²⁰¹ We have also taken into account the vernacular text like the

¹⁹⁸ Nupur Dasgupta, "Sanskrit Literature and Technical Treatises," in Abdul M. Chowdhury and Ranabir Chakravarti (eds), *History of Bangladesh: Early Bengal in Regional Perspectives (up to c. 1200 CE)*, Vol. II, Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 2018, p. 546.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid, p. 546

²⁰⁰ Jacob Dalton, "A Crisis of Doxography: How Tibetans Organized Tantra During the 8th – 12th centuries," in *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 1, 2005, p. 115

²⁰¹ For details of this particular form of hybrid Sanskrit see, Franklin Edgerton, *Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit Grammar and Dictionary*, Vol. I and II, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1985.

Caryāpada, a musical anthology composed towards the beginning of the 12th centuries.²⁰² The *caryās* of the *Caryāpada* were originally sung with specific musical notation assigned to them. The verses were probably free-floating maxims composed at a much earlier date, probably during the 10th century CE. As far as the texts under survey are concerned, almost all of them have been composed anonymously, except the *Niṣpannayogāvalī* of Abhayakaragupta. The anonymous texts like *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa* and *Tārāmūlakalpa*²⁰³ were the products of a long textual tradition from 8th century CE onwards, with the addition and reductions of multiple sections.²⁰⁴ With the progression of the textual traditions, they became further replete with complex rituals. So, alongside the obvious ambiguous authorship of these texts we may also reasonably infer that they were not the work of a singular author, and must be seen as the carrier of a long literary and cultic traditions. Same applies for the anthologies under survey like *Sādhanamālā* and *Caryāpada*, which mentioned the names of multiple authors. Moreover, for the same reason dating these texts is also very problematic affair which is elaborately discussed in the chapter three. Thus, the anthologies too reflect a composite culture characterized by heterogenous ideas and rituals propagated by a large community of Buddhist masters. In this regard we may also note that the composers of the sadhanas and *caryās* did not come from a common region as their hagiographies projected.

There were multiple manuscripts of each of these texts discovered from different parts of the subcontinent and presently preserved at different libraries like The Asiatic Society of Bengal, Cambridge University Library, royal libraries of the Maharaja of Travancore, Baroda and Nepal. The manuscripts were obviously of later dates with mismatch with each other and missing sections. One also finds it immensely difficult to locate a place of composition of the texts under survey except *Niṣpannayogāvalī* which was composed by Abhayakaragupta at the Vikramśīla Mahāvihāra at present-day Antichak, Bihar. Nevertheless, based on the extensive mention of certain names of the places we may anticipate their intimate connection to early medieval Bengal. For example, the *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa* is believed to be associated with Bengal by a lot of scholars.²⁰⁵ The composition of the text can be geographically situated in

²⁰² Syed Mahammad Shahed, “Caryāpada”, in Abdul M. Chowdhury and Ranabir Chakravarti (eds), *History of Bangladesh: Early Bengal in Regional Perspectives (up to c. 1200 CE)*, Vol. II, Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 2018, p. 592.

²⁰³ Susan A. Landesman, *The Tārā Tantra: Tārā’s Fundamental Ritual Text (Tārā-mūla-kalpa)*, Somerville: Wisdom Publication, 2007, pp. 3-7.

²⁰⁴ Glenn Wallis, *Meditating the Power of Buddhas: Rituals in the Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa*, New York: State University of New York Press, 2002, p. 9.

²⁰⁵ K. P. Jayaswal, and Rahula Sankrityayana, *An Imperial History of India in a Sanskrit Text*, Lahore: Motilal Banarasiidass, 1934, p. 3

Gauda and Magadha region as the author pays great attention to these regions.²⁰⁶ The *Sādhanamālā* and the *Caryāpada* mentioned some of their composers like Saroha, Tilopā and Nāropā who can be located in early medieval Bengal by the hagiography of eighty-four mahāsiddha called *Caturaśīti-Siddha-Pravṛtti*.²⁰⁷ Thus, the texts under survey have been taken up to understand the varied manifestation of tantric Buddhism in early medieval Bengal.

Apart from the textual source, the present research also considers a host of archaeological evidence as the key elements to understand the tantric Buddhist ritual and culture in early medieval Bengal. We have consulted the archaeological reports of the excavated Buddhist monasteries of early medieval Bengal. These sites were the premier institutions of the Buddhist academia with ample literary evidence confirming influx of Buddhist monks and pilgrimages from Tibet and Southeast Asia. Beyond the written records of the Chinese pilgrims like Xuanzang and Yijing and the Tibetan chronicles left by the itinerant monks, we have considered the material remains of the vihāras to tease out their possible relevance in the sacred space of tantric Buddhism. We have taken into account the excavation reports of the Buddhist monasteries like Paharpur,²⁰⁸ Mainamati,²⁰⁹ Savar,²¹⁰ Nālandā,²¹¹ and Vikramśīla.²¹² Some of these Buddhist sites were further excavated in recent times along with several newly excavated sites like Jagaddala,²¹³ Jagajjivanpur,²¹⁴ Telhara,²¹⁵ Krimila,²¹⁶ Bharat

²⁰⁶ *The Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa*, 24.141, <https://read.84000.co/translation/toh543.html>, accessed on 5th July, 2022.

²⁰⁷ Alaka Chattopadhyay, *Churaśi Siddher Kāhinī* (A Bengali Translation of the Tibetan *Caturaśīti-Siddha-Pravṛtti*), Kolkata: Anustup, 2019, pp. 31–38.

²⁰⁸ K.N. Dikshit, “Excavations at Paharpur, Bengal,” *Memoirs of Archaeological Survey of India*, No. 55, Delhi: ASI, 1938.

²⁰⁹ M. Harunur Rashid, “Sites and Surrounding,” in A.B.M. Hussain (ed), *Mainamati-Devaparvata*, Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 1997.

²¹⁰ N.K. Bhattasali, *Archaeological Survey of India, Annual Report, 1924-25*.

²¹¹ Hirananda Sastri, “Nalanda and its Epigraphic Material,” in *Memoirs of Archaeological Survey of India*, No. 66, Delhi: ASI, 1942.

²¹² B.S. Verma, *Antichak Excavation -2 (1971-1981)*, Delhi: ASI, 2011.

²¹³ Md. Abul Hashem Miah, “Archaeological Excavation at Jagaddala Vihara: A Preliminary Report,” *Journal of Bengal Art*, Vol. 8, 2003.

²¹⁴ Amal Roy, “Nandadirghi Vihara: A Newly Discovered Buddhist Monastery at Jagajjivanpur, West Bengal,” in Gautam Sengupta and Seena Panja (eds), *Archaeology of Eastern India: New Perspectives*, Kolkata: CASTEI, 2002.

²¹⁵ Atul Kumar Verma, *Telhara (Nalanda) Excavation: A Brief Report*, in Dharohar, Vol. 3, 2013, pp. 71-75.

²¹⁶ Anil Kumar, “Krimila: A Forgotten Adhithana of Early Medieval Eastern India,” in *Indian Historical Review*, Vol. 38, No. 1, 2011, pp. 23-50.

Bhyna,²¹⁷ Jhurijhara,²¹⁸ etc. These sites yielded numerous Buddhist figures, votive stupas, coins, seals, terracotta plaques and other artifacts which shed light on their patronage pattern, functional dimension and ritual culture. However, we shall only review the different archaeological artefacts in the light of its connection to the tantric Buddhist ritual and culture.

On the one hand the vihāras were the centers of vibrant academic practice of early medieval Buddhism, where the Buddhist pundits composed several commentaries and exegetical tantric post-literatures. On the other hand, they were the most sacred space where the daily ritual practice was performed around the central shrines/stupas and image chambers. New feature in the architectural pattern and ground plan of the Buddhist vihāras became a standard phenomenon in the Buddhist sacred landscape of early medieval Bengal and Bihar. The central temple/stupa was built on a cruciform plan with a central and four surrounded chambers housing Buddhist deities like Vairocana, Akṣobhya, Mañjuśrī. The ritual implication of the Buddhist cruciform stupa, especially its similarity with the Vajradhātu maṇḍala of the *Sarvatathāgatattvasaṃgraha* contextualizes it in the tantric Buddhist landscape. The similar structures of the mandala-stupa are to be found in a number of Southeast Asian Buddhist structures like Borobudur and Himalayan monastery like Tabo. Moreover, the finding of the dhāraṇī inscribed stone slab from Paharpur and Nālandā implies that new ritual cultural elements were making their way into the monastic ambience.

Unlike the textual corpora which is extremely difficult to contextualize in a spatial-temporal frame, the Buddhist sculptures and material remains prove to be the most formidable and durable evidence for the study of tantric Buddhism in Bengal. Select Buddhist sculptures of early medieval Bengal may serve as the most remarkable physical remains of tantric Buddhism. The visual culture of esoteric Buddhism, along with its ritual significance, transcended through the regional boundaries and reached the different regions of Southeast Asia, Nepal and Tibet. Overwhelming dependency on the texts and weaving together all kind of textual evidence to understand the nature and definition of esoteric Buddhism may lead to ‘productive ambiguity’ as argued by Kim and Linrothe.²¹⁹ The texts describing the *pañcakula*

²¹⁷ M.A. Musa, *A Consolidated Archaeological Excavation Report on Bharat Bhayna Mound, Session 1997-98*, Unpublished Excavation Report, Khulna Region, Department of Archaeology, 1998.

²¹⁸ AKM Syfur Rahaman, et. al., *Jhurijhara Dhibi: Pratnatattvik Khananer Prathamik Pratibedan* (in Bengali), Khulna: Department of Archaeology, Ministry of Cultural Affairs, Peoples’ Republic of Bangladesh, 2020.

²¹⁹ Jinah Kim and Rob Linrothe, “Introduction: Buddhist Visual Culture,” *History of Religion* 54: 1, (2014): 2.

(five family system) pantheon of Buddhist deities, are best supplemented by the Buddhist images which improve our understanding of early and later phases of esoteric Buddhism. The sculptural corpus of eastern India with its fine artistic craftsmanship from 7th – 8th century CE onwards was indicative of a distinctive school of art in the region. Often termed as “Eastern Indian School of Art” or “Pāla Art”, this school grabbed the attention of art historians since 1920s.²²⁰ The establishment of such school is often credited to the sculptors named Dhiman and Bitopāl, the father-son duo residing in the Varendra region during the reign of Dharmapāla and Devapāla.²²¹ The information is drawn from the account of Tāranātha (1608 CE), though the later date of his account may provide ground for scepticism.

S.K. Saraswati has observed that the rise of Tantra in eastern India was coinciding with the Eastern India School of Art (8th – 12th centuries) and argued that the school gave an impetus to the flourishing of Tantrayāna Art.²²² Images of specific Buddhist deities and their iconographical details in personal collection and obscure provenance have been published by art historians like Debala Mitra,²²³ Claudine Bautze-Picron,²²⁴ GJR Mevissen²²⁵ and Gouriswar Bhattacharya.²²⁶ Most of the Buddhist deities were Bodhisattva figures like Śākyamuni, Buddha in earth-touching gesture, Avalokiteśvara, Mañjuśrī, Tārā etc. However, there were Buddhist deities of esoteric characters like Hevajra, Yamantaka etc. which requires special attention.²²⁷ Our study will not engage in the iconographical details and the artistic style of the Buddhist deities, but their possible significance in the tantric Buddhist parlance of early

²²⁰ Stella Kramish, “Pāla and Sena Sculpture”, *Rupam* XL, (1929). Rakhil Das Banerji, *Eastern Indian School of Medieval Sculpture*, Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India, 1933, Susan L. Huntington, *The “Pāla-Sena” Schools of Sculpture*, Leiden, E.J. Brill, 1984.

²²¹ Lama Chimpa and Alaka Chattopadhyay, *Tāranātha’s History of Buddhism in India*, Simla: Indian Institute of Advanced Studies, 1970, p. 348.

²²² Sarasi Kumar Saraswati, *Tantrayāna Art*, p, III-XI.

²²³ Debala Mitra, *Bronzes from Bangladesh – A Study of Buddhist Images from the District of Chittagong*, Delhi: Agam Kala Prakashan, 1982.

²²⁴ Claudine Bautze-Picron, “Crying Leaves: Some Remarks on the Art of Pāla India and its International Legacy,” *East and West*, Vol. 43, 1-4, 1993, pp. 277-294. Bautze-Picron, “Some Aspect of Mañjuśrī Iconography in Bihar,” in *Tribus*, Vol 38, 1989, pp. 71-90, Bautze-Picron, “Some Aspects of the Iconography of Avalokiteśvara in Pāla-Sena Stone Sculpture,” in K. Frifelt and P. Sorensen (eds), *Scandinavian Institute of Asian Studies, Occasional Papers*, 4, London: Curzon Press, The Riverdale Company, 1989, pp. 327-349. Bautze-Picron, “Between Śākyamuni and Vairocana: Mārīcī, Goddess of Light and Victory,” in *Silk Road Art and Archaeology*, Vol. 7, 2001, pp. 263-311.

²²⁵ GJR Mevissen, “Images of Mahāpratisarā in Bengal: Their Iconographic Links with Javanese Central Asian and East Asian Images,” *Journal of Bengal Art*, vol. 4, 1999, pp. 99-129.

²²⁶ Gouriswar Bhattacharya, “Tantric Buddhist Images,” in Stanley Wolpart (ed), *Encyclopedia of India*, Vol. 4, pp. 134-138.

²²⁷ Gouriswar Bhattacharya, “Pretasantarpita-Lokeśvara,” pp. 21-44.

medieval Bengal. Apart from the published images we have also taken into consideration the catalogues of the Buddhist sculptures preserved in different museums in India.²²⁸ There are also extensive collection of Buddhist images in the museums of abroad like Berlin,²²⁹ San Francisco,²³⁰ New York,²³¹ Nepal²³² etc. The makers of the catalogues of the Dhaka Museum and the Indian Museum like Nalini Kanta Bhattasali and Theodor Bloch have mainly done their works in the aspects of collection, cataloguing, describing iconographical features and categorizing the images into Buddhist, Brahmanical and Jain sections.

We have also utilized a few epigraphic records. These records are the most effective sources for the study of the dynastic history as well the social hierarchy. The inscriptions in the early medieval Bengal were written in Sanskrit. Generally engraved on copperplates, they mainly recorded land grants. Generally, a typical Pāla inscription can be divided into five sections – the first is a verse invoking the Buddha, the second is a verse providing the genealogy and eulogy of the supreme king, the third is a prose recording geographical and administrative details, the fourth recording a benedictory verse and the fifth records the names and description of the emissary or the *dutaka* and the engraver. The inscriptions were read by a range of epigraphic experts like D.C. Sircar,²³³ R.G. Basak,²³⁴ Nalini Kanta Bhattasali,²³⁵ Gouriswar

²²⁸ Nalini Kanta Bhattasali, *Iconography of Buddhist and Brahmanical Sculptures in the Dacca Museum*, Dhaka: Dhaka Museum Committee, 1929. Mukhlesur Rahaman, *Sculptures in the Varendra Research Museum: A Descriptive Catalogue*, Rajshahi: Varendra Research Museum, 1998. Gautam Sengupta, Sharmila Saha, *Vibrant Rocks: A Catalogue of Stone Sculpture in the State Archaeological Museum, West Bengal*, Kolkata: Government of West Bengal, 2014. Theodor Bloch, *Supplementary Catalogue of the Archaeological Collections of the Indian Museum Calcutta*: Baptist Mission Press, 1911.

²²⁹ Claudine Bautze-Picron, *The Art of Eastern India in the Collection of the Museum fur Indische Kunst*, Berlin: Stone and Terracotta Sculptures, Berlin: Dietrich Reimar Verlag, 1998.

²³⁰ Claudine Bautze-Picron, "The Art of Eastern India in the Avery Brundage Collection, Asian Art Museum of San Francisco," *Art of Asia*, San Francisco, 1995.

²³¹ Kurt Behrendt, *Tibet and India: Buddhist Traditions and Transformation*, New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2014.

²³² Pratapaditya Pal, *Art of Nepal: A Catalogue of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art Collection*, Barkley: University of California Press, 1985.

²³³ D.C. Sircar (ed), *Select Inscriptions Bearing on Indian History and Civilization* Vol. 1: *From the Sixth Century B.C. to the Sixth Century A.D.*, Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1965, pp. 340–345

²³⁴ R.G. Basak, 'Tippera Copper plate Grant of Lokanātha', in *Epigraphia Indica*, Vol. XV, pp. 301-315

²³⁵ N.K. Bhattasali, "Badaganga Rock Inscription of Bhutivarman", in *Epigraphia Indica*, Vol. XXVII, 1947-48, pp. 18-23.

Bhattacharya,²³⁶ Ryosuke Furui,²³⁷ Arlo Griffith,²³⁸ Shariful Islam,²³⁹ and Rajat Sanyal.²⁴⁰ Their readings offer a glimpse into the religious congregation, social hierarchy, structure of polity, local power relations, agrarian economy and various aspects of society and politics of early medieval Bengal. These records and the image inscriptions have been used in the present study principally to understand the patronage pattern of the Buddhist vihāras and the social background of the Buddhist donors and laity. Epigraphic records of different ruling houses rarely present any comprehensive information regarding tantric Buddhism. Nevertheless, their statement regarding the purpose of the construction of the Buddhist vihāras included a few matters like copying and worshipping of manuscripts which shed light on the internal affairs of the monasteries.

Methodology

The perspective of the present research is to look at the historical process of Buddhism within which tantra arises in the context of early medieval greater Bengal. Buddhism in Bengal from an ancient time had a deeper connection and earlier roots with some parts of Bihar which witnessed the rise of vibrant Buddhist epicenters like Nālandā and Vikramśīla. During the early Pāla reign (8th – 9th centuries) extensive regions of Magadha and northern Bengal was functioning as a common unit under the suzerainty of the Pala monarchs. Moreover, in terms of the artistic style, epigraphical script and manuscript writings, these regions seemed to form a common cultural unit. The perspective of the present research is to understand a particular religious trend within Buddhism within this wider scope of early medieval Bengal and its adjacent areas. Hence, we use the notion of the spatial context as ‘greater Bengal’ as already discussed at the beginning. We propose to do it from three different, yet intimately tied, aspects in which these specific trends can be traced out. Firstly, we take up a few Buddhist Sanskrit

²³⁶ Gouriswar Bhattacharya, “A Preliminary Report on the Inscribed Metal Vase from the National Museum of Bangladesh,” in Debala Mitra (ed), *Explorations in Art and Archaeology of South Asia: Essays Dedicated to N. G. Majumdar*, Calcutta: Directorate of Archaeology and Museums, 1996, pp. 237–247.

²³⁷ Ryosuke Furui, “Ājīvikas, Manibhadra and Early History of Eastern Bengal: A New Copperplate Inscription of Vainyagupta and its Implication,” in *Journal of Royal Asiatic Society*, Series 3, 26, 4 (2016), pp. 657-681.

²³⁸ Arlo Griffith, ‘Raktamālā Copperplate of GE 159’, in *Pratna Samkisha*, New Series, vol 6, 2015, pp. 15-27

²³⁹ Shariful Islam, ‘Kotalipada Copperplate of Dvadasaditya’, *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh (Humanities)*, Vol. 53, 2011, pp. 72-82.

²⁴⁰ Rajat Sanyal, “Appendix I: Inscribed Sculptures,” in Gautam Sengupta and Sharmila Saha, *Vibrant Rocks: A Catalogue of Stone Sculpture in the State Archaeological Museum, West Bengal*, Kolkata: Government of West Bengal, 2014, pp. 253-76.

and vernacular texts to understand the transition of tantric ideas from the earlier Mahāyāna sūtra literature. In the context of early medieval Bengal, we have taken up a few representational texts like *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa*, *Tārāmūlakalpa*, *Sādhanamālā*, *Niṣpannayogāvalī* and *Caryāpada* which reflect on distinct ideological and ritualistic trends of tantric Buddhism. Each of these texts showed varied manifestation of tantric Buddhism in the spheres of ascetic practice and theological conceptualization. Secondly, we have also surveyed the archaeological remains of the Buddhist vihāras which had their own organic history. To consider their functional dimension in several non-religious spheres, we have consulted epigraphic evidence to tease out relevant information on patronage pattern and local power relations. We have tried to pinpoint certain architectural features and excavated artefacts that bear the possible imprint of tantric Buddhism. Thirdly, taking into account the limitation of using literary evidence as they might have emanated from a select community of practitioners, we have surveyed the material evidence in the form of stone and metal sculptures which are the most remarkable physical evidence of the phenomenon. The Buddhist images help us to understand the percolation and translation of the esoteric ideas in the contemporary society through these material remains. The images were also reflective of the ritual practices. The icons of tantric Buddhism have not been studied from the point of view of art history or iconography. Rather, we have studied specific Buddhist images to understand the representation of the tantric faith and ritual practices in the social context.

The origin and development of tantric Buddhism in early medieval Bengal has been observed as emerging in a region which lay in a cultural crossroad that traversed through the coastal regions around the Bay of Bengal. Simultaneously, the hinterlands of Bengal and Malay Peninsula and Archipelago were also well connected by the extension of the southern Silk route from Yunnan to Bengal during 6th – 7th century CE. Studying the regional character of Buddhism in the light of its interregional connectedness has been previously done by a number of scholars in the context of Buddhism in the Northwestern India in Kushana period (1st century BCE – 2nd century CE).²⁴¹ The study of Tansen Sen showed that the spread and growth of Buddhism in a particular area like Gāndhāra must not be seen in isolation from the adjacent areas. Moreover, these areas had deep contact and continuous interactions with far-reaching areas - with the Hun China through an extended Silk Route.²⁴² The interaction developed out

²⁴¹ Tansen Sen, *Buddhism Diplomacy and Trade: The Realignment of Sino-Indian Relations, 600-1400*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2003, pp. 3-6.

²⁴² Tansen Sen, *India, China and the World: A Connected History*, New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017, pp. 111-130.

of diverse factors like military expedition, trade and cultural exchange and religious proselytization. These processes contributed to the development of a Buddhist religious network in varied ways and led to the transmission of Buddhist texts including the versions of the *Prajñāpāramitā* and Mahāyāna sūtra literature. Sen has shown that the transmission was not unidirectional and was characterized by multifaceted processes where rituals and ideas were filtering back to the point of origin of transmission. In the context of Bengal's connection with Arakan Suchandra Ghosh has shown that the Samatāta sub-region was situated on a riverine and fluvial network and housed a port town with boats sailing to the hinterland of Bengal on the west and the Irawaddy network of Arakan in the east.²⁴³ The Harikela kingdom, identified with coastal Chattagrama with its capital at Vardhamānapura was acting as an intermediate zone between Ganga and Irawaddy plains. Suchandra Ghosh has argued that the ports of Samandar and Chittagong were serving as entrepots for the long distant traders of Bay of Bengal. Taking a cue from these studies we looked into the network theory which has recently gained coinage as a tool to analyze the religious exchange and transitions in ideas and practices through transmission of ideas emanating from social interconnectedness.²⁴⁴ The stronger and weaker ties between the different societies determine the degree of diffusion of a religious idea from one group to another. Tantric Buddhism in early medieval Bengal thus can be seen emerging with rich hue through continuous cultural interactions with other connected regions.

To probe into the origin of tantric Buddhism in early medieval Bengal we shall adopt the model of socio-religious appropriation that has been studied out by R.S. Sharma²⁴⁵ and N.R. Ray.²⁴⁶ We shall try to find clues which may throw some light on the reciprocal dynamics of the interaction between Buddhism and the aboriginal cults. We shall focus on the complex dynamics of cultural exchanges between the lower class/caste and the mainstream religious institution which penetrated into the aboriginal domain through land grants. We shall survey

²⁴³ Suchandra Gosh, "Understanding the Economic Networks and Linkages of an Expanded Harikela," in John Deyell and Rila Mukherjee (eds), *From Mountain Fastness to Coastal Kingdoms: Hard Money and 'Cashless' Economies in the Medieval Bay of Bengal World*, New York: Routledge, 2020, p. 88-90.

²⁴⁴ Anna Collar, "Network Theory and Religious Innovation," *Mediterranean Historical Review*, Vol. 22, No. 1, pp. 149-162.

²⁴⁵ R.S. Sharma, *Early Medieval Indian Society: A Study in Feudalisation*, New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2001, p. 245.

²⁴⁶ Niharranjan Ray, *Bangaleer Itihas Aadi Parba* (in Bengali) [1949], Kolkata: Dey's Publishing, 2013, p. 529.

the literary and material evidence in the specific context of early medieval greater Bengal to find out whether aboriginal elements were making a space in the Buddhist religious landscape.

The diverse manifestations of tantric Buddhism in literary and visual mediums are rather difficult to conceptualize, primarily due to the extreme occult nature of the doctrines and practices. One of the principal constraints that a researcher has to face while dealing with these sources is the deliberate obfuscation of the language of the text as well as the associative cults of the deities probably with the objective of keeping the matter secret within a cultic community. Admittedly, the traditional structure of transmission of tantric knowledge and practices remained secret for many centuries. The transmission was sometimes strictly confined within the secret conclaves (*guhyaśamāja*) and only imparted by the preceptor to his disciple, leading to the rise of close lineage traditions (*parampara*). It was deemed to be a grave crime, if a *sādhaka* reveals his knowledge to an uninitiated lay person. Grasping the core philosophical notion of tantra therefore remained a difficult task for the commoner, especially those who were not initiated in the tantric system. The host of bodily and psychic practices prescribed in the texts and the metaphorical presentation of the subject through cryptic language created the greatest shield for a novice to comprehend the various nuances of the ideas and practices of tantric Buddhism. Similarly, the complex ritual practices related to the images of Buddhist deities of the period in concern also pose the great barrier to understand their nature and purpose. However, a close reading of the texts and the study of images have been sought in order to understand general nature and orientation of the Buddhist tantra in the given context.

Most of the previous studies have either entirely focused on the tantric Buddhist literature, or separately looked into the Buddhist sculptures and occasionally consulted the iconographical description from a few texts. The present study seeks to understand the historical background of the origin and the nature of tantric Buddhism in the select context by consulting both the textual and archaeological (sculpture, painting and excavated remains of the *vihāra*) sources in combination, reviewing the evidence within the historical context. Combined Methodology of the kind proposed by D.D. Kosambi cannot be fully applied here in view of the lack of relevant ethnographic remnants.²⁴⁷ However, a combination of varied kinds of sources may aid us in understanding the characteristic trends of Tantric Buddhism in the particular spatial-temporal contexts. The images, paintings and excavated remains

²⁴⁷ D.D. Kosambi, "Combined Methods in Indology", *Indo-Iranian Journal*, Vol. 6, No. ¾, 1963, pp. 177-202.

somewhat illuminate the silence in epigraphic records and the texts devoted to ritual and esoteric practices bear imprints of the journey of Buddhist tantra in the context. We choose to look at Tantric Buddhism specifically through those sources that can be contextualized in early medieval Bengal with some degree of certainty. The Buddhist vihāras have been surveyed in the light of Chinese travelogues and excavation reports to understand their spatial distribution, architectural features, and phases of development. Epigraphic records have been consulted to understand the resource base and patronage pattern of the Buddhist vihāras. The image inscriptions have been used to spatially contextualize the images and understand the social base of the donors. The mention of regnal year in the inscription has been studied in order to determine the date of the images.

The tantric Buddhist texts have been dealt with by analysing their various editions and translations, numerous manuscripts, their findspots, their various redactions and recensions. Their place of composition can be located by tracing the mention of any spatial units. Their dates of composition have been considered to understand the chronological development of varied facets of tantric Buddhism. The social background of the authors has been enquired into to understand the social representation of the textual corpora and roots of a particular tantric trend. The anthologies which mentioned multiple authors with heterogenous social background, have been analysed as a long textual tradition gradually taking shape by compiling the scattered free-floating ideas. The anonymous tantric texts claiming to be directly transmitted from the Buddha (*'buddhavacana'*) are considered to be the earliest (7th- 8th centuries),²⁴⁸ while the commentaries and exegetical texts authored by the famed Buddhist siddhācāryas are considered to be of late production (9th – 12th centuries). The use of hybrid Buddhist Sanskrit, not conforming to the traditional grammatical rule, was probably due to the fact that it was intermingling with different literary bodies. The writers might be not so well versed in Sanskrit as many of them came from the vernacular medium. The vernacular language in a series of tantric Buddhist texts, especially in the *Caryāpada*, may indicate the gradual assimilation of esoteric theistic ideas into the popular ascetic culture. The deliberate cryptic and symbolic language of tantric Buddhism however underlines that the tradition was still being secretly transmitted in the disciple communities of the leading preceptors.

²⁴⁸ These texts, in the Tibetan tradition, are believed to have revealed by Padmasambhava in the 8th century CE. For details see, Janet Gyatso, “Signs, Memory and History: A Tantric Buddhist Theory of Scriptural Transmission,” in *The Journal of the International Association of the Buddhist Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 2, 1986, pp. 1-4.

The Buddhist images preserved in the different museums of Bangladesh and West Bengal have been surveyed to understand the presence of a tangible tantric Buddhist culture in the different sub-regions of early medieval Bengal. The concerned Buddhist sculptures have been analysed with focus on both iconographic and extra-iconographic features. Weightage has been given to the socio-religious significance of the icons. We are not in a position to determine the degree of knowledge that the community of artisans and sculptors possessed about the iconography of the Buddhist deities presented in texts like the *Sāadhanamālā* (11th century) and the *Niṣpannayogāvalī* (12th century). Many of the images bearing tantric characteristics were actually dated much before (8th – 9th centuries CE) the composition and compilation of these two texts dated in the 11th – 12th centuries. This indicates that the conceptualization of the icons with defined iconography was already extant.²⁴⁹

The images, especially those with *laukika* affiliations, have been observed with the possible social and mundane implications in mind. Some icons were conceptualized within the tantra pantheon with reference to mundane and social phenomena. Thus, some were specifically meant as protective deities against epidemics, or as the protector of the stupas, or destroyer of the enemies, etc. Similarly, the paintings in the Buddhist manuscripts, especially those produced in a particular vihāra, have been consulted to understand the religious culture and ideology of the monastic community. As the miniature metal sculptures and the manuscripts belonged to the individual monks, these may be studied as objects with personal affiliation illuminating the nature of personalised devotional relations nurtured within tantric Buddhism.

The research questions have been addressed in the four chapters of the present research. The first chapter, **Historical Context: Tracing the Background of Buddhist Tantra in Early Medieval Bengal**, deals with the socio-political context in which Tantric Buddhism gained a foothold in Bengal. The chapter gives a vivid geographical outline of the region of Bengal, its interconnectedness with Southeast Asia, Tibet and China. This is followed by an account of the ruling dynasties and their centres of power. We have also reviewed the early medieval state formation process and social stratification.

²⁴⁹ N.K. Bhattasali and Gouriswar Bhattacharya are of opinion that the sculptors of the Buddhist images followed the iconography prescribed in the *Sāadhanamālā*. For details see, Gouriswar Bhattacharya, “Iconography of Stone Sculpture,” in Abdul M. Chowdhury and Ranabir Chakravarti (eds), *History of Bangladesh: Early Bengal in Regional Perspective (up to c. 12th century CE)*, Vol. 1, Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 2018, p. 466.

In the second chapter, **The Vihāras: Searching for the Sacred Landscape of Buddhist Tantra**, we have tried to understand the possible role of Buddhist monasteries in projecting tantric ideas. We have mapped the rise of the reputed Buddhist vihāras and shrines like Nālandā, Vikramśīla, Sompura, and Mainamati that coincided with the Pāla, and Chandra Deva rule. We have looked at certain architectural features of the Buddhist temples and monasteries as well as the excavated antiquities which might contextualize the vihāras within the broader ambit of tantric Buddhism.

In the third chapter, **Textual Tradition: Understanding the trends of Tantrism in Buddhism**, we have attempted to understand the diverse tradition of tantric Buddhism and its origin by studying select tantric Buddhist texts. Here we have reviewed the Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa, Niṣpannayogāvalī, Sāadhanamālā, and Caryāpada. By discussing the diverse ritualistic traditions of the anthological and iconographical texts like the Sāadhanamālā, Niṣpannayogāvalī, and Caryāpada we have tried to show the heterogenous ritual practices and ideologies of Tantric Buddhism in Bengal.

The fourth chapter, **Buddhist Images: Locating the Visual-Physical Evidence for Tantrism**, deals with the Buddhist stone and metal sculptures as well as the painted manuscripts. These are representative of significant aspects of the material manifestations of tantric Buddhist culture in the greater region of early medieval Bengal and southern Bihar. We have specially focused on the complexities of the ritual method of worship and the various social functions of the Buddhist deities to understand their socio-cultural aspect.

The present study reveals that Buddhism took a new turn in the select region and temporal context. Though this phenomenon has been commonly regarded as tantric, we note the several idealistic variants like Vajrayāna, Mantrayāna, Kālacakrayana, and Sahajayāna each possessing several idealistic characteristics often divergent from each other. From the analysis of both the textual and imagery sources, we observe that Tantrism in Buddhism developed as a composite culture which on the one hand emerged with deep and internalized ritual characters, and, on the other hand incorporated free-floating gnostic maxims and aphorisms into the soteriological scheme of Buddhism. The autochthonous elements were gaining a foothold in the literary landscape of tantric Buddhism. For example, the verses of *Caryāpada* composed by the Sahajiya Buddhist sect regarded the ḍombā women (ḍombī) as a metaphor for Śūnyatā or Nairātmā, an important goddess in the *Hevajratantra* and the *Sāadhanamālā*. The outer circle of the maṇḍalas, described in the *Niṣpannayogāvalī* also accommodated Caṇḍālī

and Mātāṅgī as deified Buddhist versions of the lower strata. Such conceptualizations may indicate absorption of a critical social attitude inverted into a philosophical negation of the rigid norms of established socio-religious order. The origin of such notions and myriad ritual practices can be traced to have emanated from the long process of ritual and cultural reciprocations between Mahāyāna Buddhism and the already extant occult practices in the grassroots of the cultural geography that we have selected to observe. This geography emerged through cultural assimilation not only from within the region itself, but witnessed the cultural confluence of sub-Himalayan, Tibetan, Nepalese, and southeast Asian traditions. The complex of Buddhist tantra was created by the constant spiritual influx within and beyond the region. The resident monks of the Buddhist vihāras also travelled to different locations through this network for preaching and learning and took significant role in integration, adoption and transmission of the idealism faiths and practices. The Buddhist vihāras of Nālandā, Vikramśīla, Sompura, and Odantapuri became integral part of an esoteric network in the maritime Bay of Bengal and its multiple Buddhist centres. This not only led to the spread of tantric Buddhism in Tibet, Nepal, and Southeast Asia but also reshaped the Buddhist culture and practice in early medieval greater Bengal. The tantric ideas survived, to some extent, in the medieval ecstatic traditions of Bhakti, Sufi, Baul, and wandering mystics who continued the idea of preceptor-disciple lineage through their spiritually oriented songs.

CHAPTER ONE

Historical Context: Tracing the Background of Buddhist Tantra in Early Medieval Bengal

In this chapter we intend to explore the sociopolitical, and religious background for the development of Buddhist tantrism in early medieval greater Bengal. The chapter focuses on the geographical settings of greater Bengal, already defined in the introduction, between the 5th century and the 12th century CE. Early medieval Buddhist sacred centers were located in a vast region beyond the present-day boundary of West Bengal and Bangladesh. The region of south Bihar adjacent to western Bengal witnessed the rise of monastic centres like Nālandā, Vikramśīla and Kurkihar which began to flourish in the early medieval phase. This sacred orbit of Buddhism extended to cover the northern, central and southeastern parts of Bengal. We shall look into the specific sacred sites of Buddhism to understand the spatial distribution and development of the Buddhist sacred world within this geography and search the evidence which illuminate the patterns of development under specific political dynasties ruling in the concerned time period. We shall investigate the political and social backdrop of early medieval greater Bengal which may have impacted the rise of esoteric cultic practices like tantra.

Although the evidence for patronage to Buddhist tantra and associated cultic practices from political dynasties of the region is very rare, the social tensions generated by the political process of integration of non – state, non - varṇa society into a state society in early medieval Bengal prepared the ground for the rise of many esoteric religious cults within several major religions like Śaivism, Śāktism along with Buddhism.¹ The development of esoterism can be traced from the grassroot ideas and faith which came into contact with classical religious practices and ideas as assumed by R.S. Sharma² and Brajadulal Chattopadhyaya,³ although they proposed to see these processes unfolding in very different frames of regional state formation in the post classical/early

¹ Alexis Sanderson, “The Śaiva Age: The Rise and Dominance of Śaivism during the Early Medieval Period,” in Shingo Einoo (ed), *Genesis and Development of Tantrism*, Tokyo: Institute of Oriental Culture, University of Tokyo, 2009, p. 102.

² R.S. Sharma, *Early Medieval Indian Society: A Study in Feudalisation*, New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2001, p. 240.

³ B.D Chattopadhyaya, *The Making of Early Medieval India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012, pp. 204-6.

medieval context. The social roots of esoterism may be tracked from a close attention to grassroots faith in our context. However, such evidence is not very directly available and we have to tease out the presence of the grassroots ideas from within the evolved tantra trends in Buddhism itself, which bear certain connections with such primitive indigenous practices. Such grassroots practices may have borne faith in the magical powers of the supernatural. In a very different context, we note such a trend to have been present within early Buddhism if we refer to the evidence of tantra within the Bower Manuscript and other such texts, which have been discussed in this work. The intimate relation between religion and society has been highlighted by many anthropologists. In some cases magic and mysticism becomes prominent within a religious system and Malinowski has argued that these tendencies are due to the practical function of alleviating anxiety, distress, fear, and doubt and sorrow.⁴ The tantric practices within Buddhism in early medieval Bihar and Bengal can be considered to have had similar links with everyday social concerns and may be analysed in the light of these hypotheses as far as possible within the contemporary socio-political condition.

The societal structure in early medieval India, according to B.D. Chattopadhyaya, had been undergoing historical process of evolution especially within rural society and economy since the earlier Gupta phase.⁵ As he suggests, the political process of the early medieval period must not be seen in isolation. Rather it has to be observed in conjunction with the economic, social, and religious processes. Exploiting the nuances of the religious processes of the period, Chattopadhyaya had cited the work of A. Eschmann who conducted pioneering research on the Cult of Jagannāth in Odisha.⁶ He suggested that the religious process in this period was characterized by the integration of ritual cults and the tradition of sacred centers which assumed a pantheistic supra-local edifice/structure. The mechanism of integration was conducted through seeking affiliations with local faiths or deities or a sacred center that had come to acquire supra-local significance. Kunal Chakrabarti's research leads to the understanding that the purāṇic brahmanical culture (propagated in Bengal especially from the 10th - 13th centuries CE) actually characterized a

⁴ Bronislaw Malinowski, *Magic, Science and Religion, and Other Essays* [1925], Boston: Beacon Press, 1948.

⁵ B.D. Chattopadhyay, "Political Process and the Structure of Polity", in Hermann Kulke (ed), *State in India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012, p. 214.

⁶ A. Eschmann et al (eds), *The Cult of Jagannath and the Regional Tradition of Orissa*, New Delhi: Manohar, 1986.

regionalized version of the sociopolitical ideals and norms of the *dharmaśāstra* tradition which assimilated several regional cults in order to gain currency and dynamism in the regional - subregional orbits.⁷ These developments saw modification of the original practices and rise of newer traits within the older ideas. Both Buddhism and Brahmanism, the mainstream religions, developed the tendency for modifications through the adoption of similar survival strategies to grapple with the new sociopolitical order consequent upon the processes of regional state formation. Theories highlighting the relation between the prevailing social condition and the rise of tantra can be discerned in the argument of Ronald M. Davidson who thinks that esoteric Buddhism was a direct product of the Buddhist response to feudalization of Indian society in the early medieval period.⁸ We can argue here that although a straightforward acceptance of the theory may be fraught with difficulties, the conception of the dawning of tantra within Buddhism may be observed against the rising expanse of the agrarian state society within a pre – state indigenous society. The relations of power that the rising state necessitated led to notions around practices of servility and dominance within the peasant society, somewhat feudal/tributary in nature. We can draw parallels between such politico-social relations within the material world with the practice followed by the monks or ascetics/ yogīs or preceptor – disciple in the esoteric systems. The configuration of such relations can be noted in the metaphors of the Yogī transformed as the overlord of a maṇḍala of vassals.

1.1 Historical Geography of Early Medieval Greater Bengal

Before going into the discussion about the political and religious background let us discuss the historical geography of what we define as the early medieval greater Bengal.⁹ It is difficult to clearly outline the contour of early medieval Bengal as its boundaries overlapped with the regions of Magadha and Aṅga from time to time. In this section we shall discuss the geographical settings of early medieval Bengal as well as a few parts of the south Bihar. Region or space and its typical

⁷ Kunal Chakrabarti, *Religious Process the Making of a Regional Tradition*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 47

⁸ Ronald M. Davidson, *Indian Esoteric Buddhism: A Social History of Tantric Movement*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2002, pp. 2-3

⁹ Henceforth the phrase ‘Early medieval Bengal’ is to be construed as ‘early medieval greater Bengal’ as explained in the introduction.

ecological character are the primary determinants that shape human society and culture.¹⁰ The identity of an ancient region takes shape over centuries through its repeated mention in the literature or inscriptions. A region might be identified by either the people living within that particular region or by the people outside. In the process of the formation of a regional identity of ancient Bengal we shall see that different historical sources contributed to the varied identity formations from ancient time. Later, in the early medieval period it was a better-defined region with various demarcated sub-regions. The boundaries between several sub-regions became well-defined primarily by the natural demarcators like rivers and mountains.

B.M. Morrison has divided Bengal into five distinct major geographical regions: the deltaic plain, the tippera surface and the Syllhet basin which are made of recent alluvial plain and the Madhupur and Varendra uplands composed of the ancient Pleistocene alluvium.¹¹ The recent deltaic alluvial plain is made of the deltaic deposit and flood plains of the Ganga, Brahmaputra and Meghna which is about fifty thousand square miles. The Tippera surface is about 3000 square miles and made up of the deposit of Meghna and Padma with Lalmai-Mainamati hills at its centre. The Syllhet basin is 5000 square miles and demarcated by the Shillong plateau in the north, the Burmese and Tippera highland on the east and Madhupur jungle on the south. The Madhupur jungle (north of Dhaka) and Varendra region are made of old alluvium deposit and are distinguished by the deep red oxidized soil. Morrison has showed that the formations of Delta and their elevation and associated drainage pattern have a correlation with the distribution of population and the settlement patterns of the villages. Along with the rivers and their alluvial deposit the monsoonal climate also plays a pivotal role in shaping the human activities. The principal political centres of the ancient Bengal are situated alongside the river as the strategic location gave them access to the different geographic areas of the Delta. The ancient and medieval capitals like Ramavati and Laukhnati were situated beside the northern stream of Ganga where the river is entering the old delta after clearing the Rajmahal hills. Tāmralipta was situated at such a location from where one could access the sea and the Bhagirathi River system which was also

¹⁰ Aksadul Alam and A.M. Chowdhury, "Historical Geography", in Abdul Momin Chowdhury and Ranabir Chakravarti (eds), *History of Bangladesh: Early Bengal in Regional Perspectives Up to c. 1200 CE*, Vol. 1, Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 2018, p. 2.

¹¹ B. M. Morrison, *Political Centres and Cultural Regions in Early Bengal*, Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1970, pp. 8-12

connected to Karṇasuvarṇa. Vikrampura, Sonargaon and Dhaka were situated near the confluence of Padma and Meghna. Puṇḍranagara and Kotivarṣa were located alongside small rivers in the Varendra region. Therefore, the political centres of ancient Bengal and their locations alongside rivers suggest that control or access to the riverine networks has been a key factor in the history of the Delta.

The earliest identification of the people of Vaṅga, roughly corresponding to present-day western Bengal, occurs in the *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* which refers to the people living outside the frontiers of aryandom as *dasyus*. Puṇḍra has been mentioned in the same text as one of the many indigenous communities who did not conform to the Vedic norms. *Aitareya Āraṇyaka* also gives us important clues about the people of Bengal by the words *Vayaṃsi Vaṅgavagadhas-Cerapadah* which may be referred to as the people of Vaṅga and Magadha.¹² The Āraṇyakas also refers to them as a community of people held guilty of transgression. In the *Bauddhāyana Dharmasūtra*, Puṇḍras of North Bengal were among the last of the three categories of ethnic groups of people. The people of this region were regarded as living outside the ambit of Vedic culture. The description of different regions of Bengal in the epics seems to have withdrawn its status of transgressive nature. The *Rāmāyana* mentions a list of people who entered into intimate political relation with the high-born aristocrats of Ayodhyā. The search parties sent to the east to find elixirs were asked to visit the lands of Puṇḍras and Mandāras (Mandar hills near Bhagalpur). In the *Mahābhārata* Bhima's campaign in the east mentions a few places of Bengal like Modagiri (Monghyr), Puṇḍra, Tāmralipta, Kārvata and Suhmā whose people and king were subjugated by him.

Glimpses of the ancient geography could be also found from the Jain and Pali Buddhist texts. The Jain *Ācharaṅga Sūtra* describes the land of Lāḍhas (Rāḍha) in western Bengal as a pathless country inhabited by a rude folk who attacked peaceful monks.¹³ The text divides the land of Lāḍha into two parts named Vajjabhumi and Subbabhumi. The former had its capital, as mentioned by the commentators at Panitabhumi. H.C Raychaudhury has identified Vajjabhumi or

¹² H.C. Raychaudhury, 'Physical and Historical Geography', in R.C. Majumder (ed), *History of Bengal*, Vol. 1, Patna: N.V. Publication (reprint), 1978, p. 8

¹³ Nupur Dasgupta, "Jainism", in Abdul Momin Chowdhury and Ranabir Chakravarti (eds), *History of Bangladesh: Early Bengal in Regional Perspectives Up to c. 1200 CE*, Vol. 2, Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 2018, p. 314.

the land of diamond with the sarkar of Madaran in south west Bengal mentioned in *Āin-i-Ākbari* in which there was a diamond mine.¹⁴ This region was primarily comprised of the present day Birbhum, Bardhaman and Hoogly. The Subbabhumi on the other hand, has been identified by Raychoudhury as the Suhma region which also finds mention in Buddhist *Samyuttā Nikāya* and Telapatta Jātaka. This territory has been identified with the portion of modern day Medinipur district. The *Milindapañho* mentions Vaṅga in a list of maritime countries where ships anchored for the purpose of trade.

According to the evidence of the Greek historians like Pliny, Ptolemy and many other classical writers there was a settlement of people in the lower Ganga and its tributaries. The *Periplus*, while describing the east coast of India mentions river Ganga and a market town of the same name on its bank. Ptolemy also mentions the city of Gangei and distinguished it from Tamalites or Tāmralipta. Ptolemy also mentions five confluence points of Ganga and the western most of it was Kambyson which has been identified with river Kasai by H.C. Raychaudhury.¹⁵ The largest confluence point has been identified with river Hoogly. Thus, in all the early historical textual sources - Brahmanical, Jain, Buddhist and Greek different regions along with their inhabitants were assuming identity from the perspective of the wonderer monks and travelers who in their description was trying to conceptualize this region. There was sporadic mention of different constituent regions of Bengal in these sources. But the concept of greater Bengal is absent in all of them leading us to infer that the region did not form a homogeneous identity yet.

The historical geography in the early medieval time was distinct from the understanding of the region in the early historic period. It is mostly known from the large number of royal inscriptions originated from the region itself and texts composed by the writers from within the region like Sandhyākarnandīn and Dhoyī. In these sources we can observe a better understanding of the regions and its topography with vivid description of the boundaries created by the extensive river networks. The travelogues of the Chinese pilgrims Xuanzang and Yijing also contributes to conceptualize the contemporary historical geography. Based on this variety of sources one can divide early medieval Bengal into six different sub-regions: Puṇḍravardhana, Rāḍha, Gauḍa, Vaṅga, Samataṭa and Harikela each having dynamic character of their own. All the land grant

¹⁴ Raychaudhury, 'Physical and Historical Geography', p. 9.

¹⁵ Ibid, 11.

charter from this period shows that the property transfer took place in these four regions of political and cultural centers. It is important to note that the geographical connotation of these territorial terms did not remain entirely unchanged through the centuries and sometime are found overlappings.

Puṇḍravardhana originally consisted of northern part of Bengal, i.e. Rajshahi-Bogra-Dinajpur areas of Bangladesh and part of northern sector of West Bengal. Geographically it is constituted by Barind tract and the floodplains of rivers Padma, Mahananda, Punarbhava, Atrai, Tista and Karatoya. The name of this sub-region is based on the name of an indigenous community which developed into a territorial unit. The Digvijaya section of the *Mahābhārata* places the people named Puṇḍra to the east of Monghyr and associates them with the prince who ruled on the banks of the Kosi. The capital of this sub-region was Puṇḍranagara which has been identified with fortified area of Mahasthangarh. It is recorded in the accounts of Xuanzang who visited India during the first half of the 7th century CE, that from Kajangala (near Rajmahal) he started eastward journey, crossed the Ganga and after a journey of about 600 li he reached the 'pun-na-fa-tan-na' (Puṇḍravardhana) country.¹⁶ Then he travelled eastward above 900 li and after crossing a large river he came to 'ka-mo-lu-po' (Kāmarūpa). Xuanzang's account attests that the boundary of Puṇḍravardhana bhukti just prior to the 8th century CE may be fixed with a fair degree of certainty: it comprised the whole region of northern Bengal from the Rajmahal, the Ganga and the Bhagirathi to the Karatoya. From the examination of the Pāla epigraphs it would appear that the Puṇḍravardhana *bhukti* should also be taken to connote an area similar to the Gupta records, i.e., northern Bengal. However, 'Pauṇḍra' in the records of the Chandra and the Varman must not be confused with that of Gupta and Pāla records since the former suggests that the area corresponds to south-eastern Bengal. Finally, from the Sena records it would appear that Puṇḍravardhana bhukti included northern, south-western and even some parts of south-eastern Bengal. The *Rāmacharita* of Sandhyākarnandī states that Varendramaṇḍala is the best part in the world and Puṇḍravardhana is its most precious jewels (Varendri-maṇḍala-chuḍāmani)¹⁷. There is detailed

¹⁶ Samuel Beal (tr.), *Su-Yu-Ki: Buddhist Records of the Western World*, vol-2, New Delhi: Oriental Books Reprint Corporation, 1969, p. 194.

¹⁷ Alam and Chowdhury, "Historical Geography", p. 20.

description of the geographical denotation, topography, flora and fauna of the Varendra region in the Rāmācharita.

The Rāḍha unit roughly denoted areas to the west of the Bhagirathi, i.e. the present districts of Birbhum, Bankura, Burdwan, Hughly, Howrah and Medinipur in West Bengal. Geographically it is constituted by the lateritic old alluvium with a network of rivers like Ajay, Damodar, Rupnarayan and Kasai. In the west its boundary is formed by Rajmahal and Chotonagpur Hill tract. Padma and Bhagirathi River demarcated it from the other sub-regions. The Naihati Copper Plate Inscription of Vallālasena (AD 1160-1178)¹⁸ mentions Rāḍha as the ancestral settlement of the Senas. Whereas, the Bhuvaneśvara Prasasti Inscription of Bhaṭṭabhadra records that Rāḍha was a waterless, woody and dry region. Rāḍha is further divided into two parts: Dakkhina Rāḍha (South) and Uttara Rāḍha (North) with Ajay River as a demarcator.¹⁹ The Tirumalai Rock Inscription of the Chola dynasty clearly mentions two divisions of Rāḍha, the northern (Uttira-Lāḍham) and southern (Takkana-Lāḍham).²⁰ Rupendra K. Chattopadhyaya suggested that the well-known archaeological sites like Betor (in Howrah district), Saptagram, Garh Mandaran (in Hughli district), Bharatpur, Mangalkot (in Burdwan district) and possibly Dihar and Puskarana (in Bankura district) belong to Dakkhina Rāḍha; whereas sites like Rajbadidanga and Gitagram (in Murshidabad district), Paikor, Batikar, Bahiri, Kagas, Kotasur (in Birbhum district) and Vallala Rajar Dhibi (in Nadia district) belong to Uttara-Rāḍha.²¹

Another sub-unit closely situated to the sub-region of Rāḍha is Gauḍa. It is situated between Puṇḍra in the north and north-east and Rāḍha on the south. Bengal, in spite of the other separate cultural and geographical divisions, was once widely known as Gauḍadeśa. Sometimes it denotes the whole of Bengali speaking area. The earliest reference of a country in eastern India named Gauḍa might be found in the *Arthaśāstra* and the *Kāmasūtra* of Vātsāyana (3rd – 4th century CE) as pointed out by Suchandra Ghosh.²² The Purāṇic reference also brought in light the

¹⁸ R.D. Banerji, “Naihati Copper-plate of Vallālasena,” *Epigraphia Indica*, Vol-XIV, 1917, pp. 156-63

¹⁹ Amitabha Bhattacharyya, *Historical Geography of Ancient and Early Medieval Bengal*, Calcutta: Sanskrit Pustak Bhandar, 1977, p. 51

²⁰ http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/121656/6/06_chapter%202.pdf

²¹ Rupendra K Chattopadhyaya, 'Radha', *Banglapedia: National Encyclopedia of Bangladesh*, 2006, http://fwww.banglapedia.org/httpdocs/HT/R_0004.HTM

²² Suchandra Ghosh, “Gauḍa: Viewing Its Political Geography and Writing Traditions”, in Jean Francois Salles (ed), *Sources on the Gauḍa Period in Bengal: Essays in Archaeology*, New Delhi: Primus Books, 2020, p. 45

geographical idea of Gauḍa by designating it as a janapada in the eastern quarter. Gauḍa has been also mentioned as an identical janapada along with Puṇḍra, Vaṅga, Samataṭa and Vardhamāna and Tāmralipti in the *Bṛhatsaṃhita* of Varāhamihira (6th century CE). With the rise of Śaśāṅka, the formidable ruler of Gauḍa, the political limit of Gauḍa probably extended further till the southern coastal area. This inference was supported by the two epigraphic evidence – the Haraha Inscription of Maukhārī ruler Iṣāṅavarman (554 CE) and the Gurgi Inscription of Prabodhaśiva (11th century).²³ Both the inscriptions affirm that the territory of the Gauḍa included the coastal area. The sub-region of Gauḍa probably constituted a crucial sacred space of Buddhist tantra as the tantric Buddhist text *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa* confirms that the northern limit of Gauḍa extended to the Puṇḍravardhana sub-region and was being ruled by Śaśāṅka.²⁴ This information might be corroborated with the epigraphic reference in the Dubi plates where an acute political struggle was described between the king of Gauḍa and the kings of Kāmarupa – Bhāṣkarvarman and Susthitavarman. When Xuanzang visited Karṇasuvarṇa in 7th century CE, he mentioned Śaśāṅka as the ruler of Karṇasuvarṇa. But Bana in *Harṣacharita* mentioned Śaśāṅka as *Gauḍādhipati*, Gauḍa Bhujanga and Gauḍa Pāṣanda. This indicates that in the first part of the 7th century CE, Gauḍa and Karṇasuvarṇa were probably used interchangeably. In the *Gauḍavaho* of Vākpatirāja Magadha was stated to be a part of the Gauḍa kingdom indicating that the orbit of the Gauḍa sub-region continued to expand. According to D.C. Sircar the eastern part of Bengal was known as Vaṅga and the western part was known as Gauḍa. At the beginning it comprised of the regions of Murshidabad and southern part of the Malda district with Karṇasuvarṇa as its centre. Later, parts of Birbhum and Bardhaman formed the Gauḍa janapada. Under the rule of Śaśāṅka the fame of Gauḍa spread far wide and its boundary was extended both southward and northward. The Pāla kings were referred to as *Gauḍeśvara*, *Gauḍarājā* and *Gauḍendra* in the inscriptions of rulers outside Bengal like Raṣtrakūta and Pratihāra. The later Sena rulers like Viśvarūpasena and Keśavasena used the title of *Gauḍādhipati* for themselves.

The Vaṅga region mainly embodied Dhaka-Faridpur-Munshiganj and Barishal areas in present Bangladesh. The area surrounded by rivers Bhagirathi, Padma and Meghna constitutes the main part of this unit, while the boundaries of it have changed time to time. Vaṅga witnessed the

²³ Ghosh, “Gauḍa: Viewing Its Political Geography”, p. 47

²⁴ T. Ganapati Sastri (ed), *Āryamañjuśrīmūlakalpa*, Trivandrum: Superintendent Government Press, 1920, Chapter 53

rise of an independent kingdom with strong administrative functions and 7 copperplates were issued in the second and third quarters of the 6th century CE by three monarchs: Gopacandra (525-540 CE), Dharmāditya (540-560 CE) and Samācāradeva (560 CE). The issuing place and the find spots of all the 7 copperplates indicate that the kingdom (Vaṅga) extended over a vast territory from Baleswar in Odisha, through southern part of West Bengal (Vardhamāna-bhukti) to southern part of Bangladesh (Navyāvakāśikā and Varākamaṇḍala). From the 10th to the mid-13th century CE, Vaṅga was under the rule of the Chandras, the Varmaṅs and finally the Senas. Vaṅga seems to have been divided into northern and southern divisions for some time.

The Samatāṭa region roughly corresponded to the region east of the river Meghna, i.e. Noakhali, Comilla, Chittagong and adjacent areas in the present Bangladesh and some parts of present Tripura in India, with sub units of Srihatta and Harikela respectively on its northern and southern sides. It figures in the records of the Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang in the 7th century CE as an area where there were many Buddhist monasteries and which was on the sea-side and was low and moist was more than 3000 li in circuit.²⁵ At the end of the 7th century CE Sheng-Chi mentioned a king of Samatāṭa called Rājabhāṭa, who was the same person as the Rājarājabhāṭa of the 7th century CE Ashrafpur copper plates. These plates were issued from Karmanta-Vāsaka, identified with Badkamta in the Tipperah (present Tripura). Eight kilometers from the west of Comilla town lies an isolated range of low hills locally called Lalmai-Mainamati. It is with these hills that the political and cultural centre of the 'Devaparvata' is intimately connected. This territorial sub-unit has to date yielded 16 copperplate grants. It was a pilgrim spot and a religious and cultural centre long before it became the political centre of the region. Capital of Samatāṭa was established at Devaparvata for the first time by Balabhāṭa, the Khaḍga ruler, sometime in the latter half of the 7th century CE as is evidenced by Balabhāṭa's Mainamati Plate.

The Harikela sub-region was situated in the trans-Meghna region separate from Samatāṭa. The kingdom of Harikela principally included the present-day Chittagong district. It was a separate political entity in the in the coastal area of Chittagong and its adjacent areas. Vardhamānpura or the present day Borodhan village of Chittagong was the capital of Harikela kingdom as mentioned in epigraphic records.²⁶ The growth of political power of the kingdom of Harikela gradually

²⁵ Samuel Beal (tr.), *Su-Yi-Ki*, p. 199.

²⁶ Chowdhury and Alam, 'Historical Geography', p. 26.

brought the areas of Noakhali, Comilla, Tripura and Sylhet under the suzerainty of the kingdom. As a result, its boundary was extended up to the hilly tract of Tripura, Cachher and Lushai hills to the east, and and Jainta hills to the north. Meghna and Surma constituted its western boundary. However, historians have agreed that it is not possible to make any sharp distinction between the boundary of Samatāṭa and Harikela. They also suggest that Samatāṭa, Harikela, Vaṅga, Śrīhaṭṭa and Pāṭṭikera formed one compact geographical region which constituted the whole of south and south-east Bengal.

Along with the above mentioned six primary sub-divisions of Bengal, we have also taken into account the areas like Nālandā, Vikramśīla Bodhgaya and Kurkihar, which were located in south of the present-day Indian state of Bihar. These sacred sites also formed a part of the Gupta and the Pāla empire and were well-connected to the Buddhist centers of northern and southeastern Bengal. Nālandā is situated to 95 Kilometers southeast of Patna. Hirananda Sastri has noted that Nālandā was a suburb of Rajagrha which was a monsoonal retreat of Mahāvīra for almost fifteen years.²⁷ Faxian's account also confirmed that Nālandā was situated a yojana southwest of Rajagrha where Sariputta was born and attained enlightenment. Vikramśīla has been identified with the present-day Antichak village of Bhagalpur district of Bihar. The famous monastery featured prominently in the accounts of Tibetan monks like Dharmasvāmīn and Tāranātha.²⁸ From the narrative of the latter, we come to know that the monastery was built in the north of Magadha on the bank of Ganga on top of a hillock by the Pāla king Dharmapāla. Dharmasvāmīn, however, found it in ruins in 1234 CE. The most sacred Buddhist site under survey is Bodhgaya which is situated in the Gaya district of Bihar on the bank of Phalgu river. Faxian recorded a tower at this site of the Buddha's enlightenment.²⁹ The village of Kurkihar, identified with Kukkutapada vihāra by Cunningham is situated in Wazirgunj district, 27 Kilometers east of Gaya. The inscriptional data of Kurkihar suggest that it was a Buddhist pilgrimage center. The site yielded a hoard of 226 bronze images and several stone images

²⁷ Hirananda Sastri, *Nalanda and its Epigraphic Material*, MASI, No. 66, Delhi, 1942, p. 4.

²⁸ Rajat Sanyal, "Antichak," in A.M. Chowdhury and Ranabir Chakravarti (eds), *History of Bangladesh: Early Bengal in Regional Perspectives Up to c. 1200 CE*, Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 2018p. 131.

²⁹ Rajat Sanyal, "Bodhgaya," in A.M. Chowdhury and Ranabir Chakravarti (eds), *History of Bangladesh: Early Bengal in Regional Perspectives Up to c. 1200 CE*, Vol. 1, Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 2018, p. 168.

1.2 Situating early medieval Bengal in the intra-Asian Buddhist cross-culture

Bengal must be seen in its historical interconnectedness with the regions of south-east Asia and China beyond its strict regional confinements. Situating early medieval Bengal in the context of intra-Asian linkages may open a new horizon to understand the intermingling of different regional ritualistic and cultic ideas. From the 1st century BCE, the region developed as a viable ground of burgeoning cultural interaction with the Greek travellers, and Aśokan emissaries sailing in and out from the port of Tāmralipta. The region was situated at an economic and cultural crossroads where host of diverse cultural elements met and created a cauldron of interaction and adaptation. Buddhism as an expanding religion reached Tibet, China and southeast Asia through the different trade corridors crossing over early medieval Bengal. The entire coastal regions of Bay of Bengal had already developed interlinks through the different ports and towns in Bengal, Myanmar, Cambodia, Java and Indonesia. The uplands of Bay of Bengal were well-connected through the trade networks facilitating the movement of not only trade commodities but also religious and cultural idea and practices. Conventionally India's interaction with the southeast Asian regions through the maritime Bay of Bengal was portrayed by the nationalist historian as 'Hinduization' or 'colonization' of the latter by the former.³⁰ They have argued that the spread of the Indian civilization in the southeast Asian region through the Chola invasion led to the Indianization of the latter. However, recent scholars have highlighted that it was not an unidirectional process. The local socio-political dimensions and cultural traits of Southeast and Central Asia were equally shaping the Indian religious and cultural arena.³¹

In terms of the regional identity, the regions of upper Burma and Laos were gradually regarded as an extension of Bengal as Fra Mauro's 15th century map identified these regions as Baṅgāla-Māchin (Mahāchina).³² From 7th century CE onwards China started to access the Buddhist centers of South Asia from the eastern route, bifurcating from its erstwhile Southwestern

³⁰ Rila Mukherjee, *India in the Indian Ocean World: From the Earliest Times to the 1800 CE*, Singapore: Springer, 2022, p. 83

³¹ Tansen Sen, *Buddhism, Diplomacy and Trade: The Realignment of Sino-Indian Relations, 600-1400*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2003, p. 32.

³² Rila Mukherjee, "From Mountain Fastness to Coastal Kingdoms: The Contours of Medieval Bay of Bengal" in John Deyell and Rila Mukherjee (eds), *From Mountain Fastness to Coastal Kingdoms: Hard Money and 'Cashless' Economies in the Medieval Bay of Bengal World*, New York: Routledge, 2020, p. 30.

routs. The Southeast Asia was not merely facilitating the commodity movement from India by acting as a stopover for the traders and itinerant monks, but it developed its own networks of exchange with China. The indigenous culture and practice of Southeast Asia and the overseas activities of its kings and chieftains must not be neglected as it was greatly contributing to the shaping of knowledge and ideas in India and China. Rila Mukherjee has shown that, despite the obvious influence of the Indian and Chinese civilization on the Southeast Asian statecraft and social organization, one cannot deny its independent agency in ideas, ritual, culture and practice.³³ The northern Bay of Bengal region seems to be the only place which did justice to the name *Āsumudrahimācala* or ‘stretching from mountain to sea’ as it connected Southeast Asia and Lanka through maritime sailing and also had the land routes upto southwest China.

The earliest archaeological evidence of interconnectedness between the Bay of Bengal and South China Sea via the Southeast Asian region came from the Khao Sam Kaeo in the late 5th to 2nd centuries BCE.³⁴ It is believed that the South Asian craftsmen carried the Indian techniques of crafting to Khao Sam Kaeo. They were probably welcomed by the local elites and eventually gave birth to a trading polity and a key maritime trade network. The network continued to expand in the Phu Khao Thong and Bang Kluai Nok as a Sankritized Pali Inscription, datable to 1st – 2nd centuries CE, was found from the region with the reference of a Brāhmaṇa sailor. However, from the 4th to 6th centuries CE there is a dearth of archaeological evidence to know Bengal’s connection to Southeast Asia. From *Xin Tang Shu*, the 10th century CE Chinese chronicles of the Tang dynasty, we find the reference of a Southwest Silk Route connecting Yunnan to Bengal.³⁵ The route ran over the regions of Thailand, Laos, Cambodia traversing through the landscape of land, river and sea. The route started in Tonkin and reached Magadha in north India via Yunnan, Burma and Bengal. The riverine network of Bengal and Burma connected the Kingdom of Lan Na in north Thailand and Ayutthaya in Siam. The maritime linkages were continued through the Southwestern coastal ports and monasteries like Moghalmari and Tāmralipta and their Southeastern counterparts like Mainamati and Chattagram.

³³ Mukherjee, *India in the Indian Ocean World*, p. 84.

³⁴ *Ibid*, p. 84.

³⁵ Bin Yang, “Horse, Silver, and Cowries: Yunnan in Global Perspective”, in *Journal of World History*, Vol. 15, No. 3, pp. 287-289.

John Deyell has pointed out that around 1200 CE the silver bullion was transported from Yunnan to Bengal via Upper Burma through three main land routes, in addition to the maritime routes.³⁶ The first route went from Yung Chang to the upper Brahmaputra Valley in Assam after crossing the Irrawaddy River and passing through the Patkai Range. The second route connected Shweli River and Manipur via Imole Pass. The third route began from Taguang on the bank of Irrawaddy and reached Arakan via Pagan and Aeng Pass. Under the Sultanate rule, Lakhanauti (Bengal) developed a good connectivity with Tibet via Kāmarūp and there was another route from Kashmir to China via Kumaon mountains, Patkai Hills and Upper Burma.³⁷ The most lucrative commodity that was imported from Yunnan to Bengal was horse. Bengal in the early medieval period lacked good-quality warhorses. However with the rise of the powerful political entities like the Pālas and the Senas in eastern India and the continuous warring state of early medieval period led to the increased demand of war horses. The high value of horses among the Sena rulers is signified by their title Aśvapati (lord of horses) along with Gajapati (lord of elephant) and Mārapati (lord of men).³⁸ Ranabir Chakravarti has noted that Yunnan had a specific kind of hilly horse, distinctive from the Tibetan hilly horses. Following the account of Marco Polo he has shown that horses and oxen sold to the merchant reached from Yunnan to Bengal through Pagan after travelling for forty five days.³⁹ Bengal served as a nodal point for horse trade because after arriving at Bengal the horses were further transported to eastern Deccan and China. Horses were the costliest trade commodity exported from Bengal as recorded in the Chinese chronicles. According to him the history of horse trading in Bengal goes back to the third century CE and continued during post-1200 CE and that they were also an important commodity for the maritime trade.

Apart from horses, silver too became an important trade commodity that was exported from Tang and Ming China to Bengal. Starting from the early medieval period till the 15th century Bengal gradually developed a monetization system depending on imported silver.⁴⁰ As Bengal traditionally did not have any silver deposit, minting and crafting of silver was entirely dependent

³⁶ John Deyell, "The China Connection: Problem of Silver Supply in Medieval Bengal," in Sanjay Subramanyam (ed), *Money and the Market in India 1100-1700*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994, p. 128.

³⁷ Yang, "Horses, Silver, and Cowries", p. 290.

³⁸ Ibid, p. 300.

³⁹ Ranabir Chakravarti, "Early Medieval Bengal and the Trade in Horses: A Note," in *Journal of Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 42, No. 2, 1999, p. 194-211.

⁴⁰ Yang, "Horses, Silver, and Cowries: Yunnan in Global Perspective", p. 304.

on the importation. Both the southeastern and maritime Silk Route played a pivotal role in the transportation of silver from Yunnan to Bengal via Burma. Similarly, cowries were exported from Maldives to Bengal, and was in large circulation in India, Arakan, Pegu, Siam, Laos, Burma and Yunnan. The cowries were generally used for petty transaction of daily life. While metal currency was used in global market, cowries were used in local markets. Simultaneously, in Ming China and Dali Kingdom, cowries were used for paying taxes and making donation to the Buddhist monasteries.⁴¹ Both silver and cowrie were important medium of exchange in the Samatāṭa and Harikela sub-regions bordering the regions of Bengal and Arakan in the southeast.

The Harikela silver coins of Comilla and southern Tripura was instrumental in consolidating local economy and overseas trade with Arab world.⁴² The accounts of Marvazi and Ibn Battuta simultaneously attests to the fact that cowrie was a very popular medium of exchange in southeast Bengal as well as in the hinterlands in the Pāla and Sena domains.⁴³ Suchandra Ghosh has shown with ample epigraphic evidence that the Samatāṭa sub-region and its capital city Devaparvata was situated in a riverine and fluvial network and was acting as a port town with boats sailing to not only the hinterland of Bengal but to the Irawaddy network of Arakan.⁴⁴ The Harikela kingdom, identified with coastal Chāttagrāma with its capital at Vardhamānapura was acting as an intermediary zone between Ganga and Irawaddy plains. Suchandra Ghosh has argued that the ports of Samandar and Chittagong were serving as an entrepot for the long distant traders of Bay of Bengal. The significant Buddhist monastic remains in this sub-region with a much earlier archaeological proof of human habitation probably indicate that Buddhism was adopting several cross-cultural elements. The Buddhist text *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa* also mentioned Harikela and Karmaranga (identified with lower Arakan by D.C. Sircar) where Yakṣa king Mahābala was a great patron of goddess Tārā.⁴⁵

Bengal also shared its northern borderlands with Tibet and Nepal serving as an important transit zone. The northern sub-region of Puṇḍravardhana in the early medieval period was

⁴¹ Yang, “Horses, Silver, and Cowries”, p. 308.

⁴² Suchandra Ghosh, “Understanding the Economic Networks and Linkages of an Expanded Harikela,” in John Deyell and Rila Mukherjee (eds), *From Mountain Fastness to Coastal Kingdoms: Hard Money and ‘Cashless’ Economies in the Medieval Bay of Bengal World*, New York: Routledge, 2020, p. 87.

⁴³ Ibid, pp. 87-88.

⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 88-90.

⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 94.

extended up to the Himalayan foothills. The interaction between the eastern Himalayan belt and the Bay of Bengal through the corridor of land and river network integrated the Himalayan economy with the coastal Bay of Bengal.⁴⁶ The riverine network of northern Bengal connected with Brahmaputra created important transport channels between Kamrupa, Burma, Yunnan and China. Given the dynamic character of the cultural units of Bengal, scholars have argued that the funnel-like coast and fragmented geography created a space for polycentrism. The connected regional geography enabled diverse conceptions of nature, environment, and rituals to assimilate with neighboring traditions. Thus a shared cultural paradigm was created between Nepal, Yunnan, and Bengal where snake in Nepal and Kunming in Yunnan became the central figures in their foundational myths. Similarly, the legends of Mañjuśrī also transmitted from India to China and then traveled back to Nepal in the 7th century CE. The legends said that Mañjuśrī saved the people from *nāgas* and created a Chinese-type government in Kathmandu with a king named Dharmakara who was succeeded by the Pāla king Dharmapāla.⁴⁷ According to the legends of a contemporary text, the capital of Yunnan was shifted from Dali to Kunming after the establishment of Buddhist authority was established in 649 CE.⁴⁸ Eventually from the capital of Kunming the Chinese era was replaced by Indian era in 889 CE. Similarly, Meng Rai's Lan Na Kingdom in 1259 CE emerged as a city-state connecting Mekong Basin with northern Laos. Lan Na's Buddhist architectural and sculptural style showed striking similarities with Bagan and Pāla Bengal. Looking at the substantial evidence for the extensive maritime and inland trade network we can assume the prevalence of exchange in Buddhist texts, images, doctrine and cult through these networks.

Networks of Buddhist monks and pilgrims started to gradually emerge across different regions of South and Southeast Asia from 7th century CE onwards. The process was further proliferated during 8th century CE and became a 'pan-Asian phenomenon.'⁴⁹ The primary carrier of this new Buddhist wave was the Buddhist masters who possessed a 'cosmopolitan vision.' Andrea Acri has suggested that the flourishing of esoteric Buddhism was possible due to the

⁴⁶ Mukherjee, "From Mountain Fastness to Coastal Kingdoms", p. 22.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, p. 21.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, p. 21.

⁴⁹ Andrea Acri, "Introduction: Esoteric Buddhist Networks Along the Maritime Silk Routes, 7th – 13th centuries AD," in Andrea Acri (ed), *Esoteric Buddhism in Medieval Maritime Asia: Networks of Master, Texts and Icons*, Singapore: ISEAS, p. 7.

state support extended by the different Asian dynasties like the Pālas and Chandras in Bengal, Bhaumakāras in Odisha, Yarlung in Tibet, Lambakannas in Srilanka, Śailendras in Java and Esoteric Buddhist Centers around the Bay of Bengal c. 8th – 12th centuries, After Andrea Acri Sumatra, Tang in China, Silla in Korea and Heian period in Japan. After the first wave in 8th century CE, the second wave of esoteric Buddhism gained momentum in 11th century, when tantric ritual became an effective mean to gain political power in the courtly culture of Jayavarman VII in Cambodia and Kṛtanagara in Java and Kublai Khan in China.⁵⁰ As far as the Indian subcontinent is concerned the primary activities of the esoteric Buddhist milieu were concentrated in the northeastern Buddhist sacred places like Nālandā, Vikramśīla, Somapura and Uddānapura. The maritime network of Bay of Bengal was equally facilitating the spread of esoteric Buddhism in the coastal Odisha like Ratnagiri, Udaygiri, and Lalitgiri, alongside the coastal Andhra, Tamilnadu and Srilanka.

The connection between South Asian and Southeast Asian Buddhism may be drawn from a number of archaeological and epigraphical evidence. The Sanskrit inscriptions from Arakan, mostly datable to 7th and 8th centuries, showed significant scriptural similarities with the inscriptions found in Bengal like Faridpur Copperplate, Damodarpur Copperplates and that of the obscure king Dharmāditya.⁵¹ The linguistic as well as scriptural similarities led Johnston to propose that they were the products of Arakan's interaction with eastern Bengal. The inscriptions were mainly dedicatory and panegyric in nature, recording the affiliation of the laity as well as the king Ānandachandra to Mahāyāna Buddhism. Based on the similarity of a few letters between the dedicatory inscription on a bell and that of the scribed brick at Nālandā, Johnston inferred that Nālandā's brick owed its origin to Arakan.⁵² Ānandachandra's inscription on the pillar of Shitthaung Pagoda also bears striking similarities with king Yasovermadeva's inscription at Nālandā.⁵³ A Sinhalese monastery has been found in Central Java while the Srivijayan monasteries of the Silandra dynasty have been found from Nālandā and Nagapattinam. The Tibetan Canon recorded that some of the Sanskrit Tantric Texts compiled by Dharmakīrti actually originated in Suvarṇadvīpa. Buddhist architectural pattern and technology are also believed to have crated a

⁵⁰ Acri, "Introduction: Esoteric Buddhist Networks," p. 8.

⁵¹ E.H. Johnston, "Some Sanskrit Inscriptions of Arakan," in *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London*, Vol. 11, No. 2, pp. 359-371.

⁵² *Ibid*, p. 362.

⁵³ *Ibid*, p. 365.

commonality between the Himalayan and Southeast Asian Buddhism as the Tabo monastery in Himachal Pradesh shows striking similarity with that of Borobudur.⁵⁴ Java and Sumatra developed an extensive culture of Tārā and Mañjuśrī who were greatly invoked by the seafarers. Along with the great Buddhist monuments sponsored by the Śailendra rulers in Java like Borobudur, Chandi Sewu, Plaosan, and Mendut the region also yielded a number of Siddhamatrka inscription of mid-9th century CE character.⁵⁵ The study of Arlo Griffith in the epigraphic records of the Sumatra and Indonesia also indicated a Pan-Asian character of Buddhism.⁵⁶

Apart from the inscription, the textual transmission between Bengal, Siam and Suvarṇadvīpa may be taken into account to understand the cross-cultural aspect of early Medieval esoteric Buddhism. Considering the continuous reproduction of the text like the *Durbodhāloka* by Dharmakīrti in several regions of Malay Peninsula, Peter Skilling has observed that in the 11th century the Malay Peninsula became an integral part of the network of Pāla intellectual, ritual and iconographic world.⁵⁷ This Sanskrit text, originally composed in the city of Srivijaya of Suvarṇadvīpa at the request of king Cuḍāmaṇivarman, also reached Tibet after Atisa had translated it into Tibetan between 1042 and 1045 CE. The Vat Sithor Inscription of Kampong Cham in Cambodia referred to the texts *Madhyāntavibhāga* and *Tattvasaṃgraha*, both of which according to Snellgrove reflected the Pāla curriculum.⁵⁸ The rituals and iconography of tantric deities like Hevajra and Vajrasattva were also transmitted from India to Southeast Asia. Thus, being an integral part of the ‘strategic cross-roads’ of mercantile community and political power connecting an extensive region of maritime South and Southeast Asia, Bengal became a part and parcel of the larger esoteric Buddhist landscape in Asia.

1.3 The political dynasties and their centers of power in early medieval Bengal

After being a supposed eastern most frontier region of Mauryan Empire in the 3rd century BCE as attested by the Mahasthangarh Fragmentary Inscription, Bengal again became a frontier

⁵⁴ Andrea Acri, “Introduction: Esoteric Buddhist Networks,” p. 11.

⁵⁵ Ibid, p. 12.

⁵⁶ Arlo Griffith, “Inscriptions of Sumatra: Further data on the epigraphy of the Musi and Batang Hari rivers basin,” in *Archipel*, 81, 2011, pp. 139-75.

⁵⁷ Peter Skilling, “Geographies of Intertextualities: Buddhist Literature in Pre-modern Siam,” in *Aseanie*, Vol. 19, 2007, p. 97

⁵⁸ David Snellgrove, *Angkor - Before and After: A Cultural History of the Khmer*, Bangkok: Orchid Press, 2004, pp. 82-84.

territory under the Gupta Empire. Part of Bengal came under the suzerainty of the Gupta rulers who ruled major parts of northern India from 300-600 CE. Among the host of Gupta copperplates that mentioned the name of Bengal, the earliest was the Allahabad Praśasti of Samudragupta. The panegyrics mentioned several kings of Āryāvarta defeated by the omniscient Samdragupta like Chandravarman who has been identified with Chandravarman of the Susuniya Rock Inscription.⁵⁹ The same inscription mentioned him as the Puṣkarañādhīpa Mahārājā Śrī Chandravarman, son of Śrī Siṃhavarman. Puṣkarañādhīpa has been identified with Pokharna in the Bankura district of West Bengal in the ancient Rāḍha sub-region. Among the other defeated kings there were five number of the *prtyantanṛpati* (frontier kings) including the kings of Samataṭa, Devaka, Nepala, Kāmarūpa and Kartṛpura. These kingdoms were turned into tributary state by the Gupta sovereign by obliging them to pay tributes and obey orders. So, in the early Gupta rule Bengal was a mere frontier state contributing to the exchequer of the Gupta empire. A.M. Chowdhury has anticipated that Samudragupta's empire was stretched till the Puṇḍra and Vaṅga sub-regions where the emperor could exercise direct control while Assam and trans-Meghna regions became the remotely controlled area.⁶⁰

The epigraphic records of Kumāragupta I and his successor from 425-534 CE demonstrates without any doubt that Northern Bengal formed an integral part of the Gupta Empire with Puṇḍravardhana bhukti as its administrative headquarter. Wide range of inscriptional corpus including Dhanaidaha, Kalaikuri-Sultanpur, Baigram, Jagadishpur, Paharpur, Raktamala and five Damodarpur Copperplates provide ample testimony of the existence of a structured land administration system in Bengal under the Guptas. There seems to be a controversy regarding the successor of the Kumāragupta I and the subsequent Gupta line of kings. Inscriptions of Skandagupta and Budhagupta presenting contradictory genealogies after Kumāragupta I led to an obscure understanding of the succession of the later Gupta emperors like Skandagupta, Purugupta, Kumāragupta II and Viṣṇugupta. Budhagupta was probably the last powerful Gupta ruler after whom three simultaneous rulers came to the scene: Vaiṇyagupta in the south-eastern part of Bengal (507 CE), Bhānugupta in the eastern Malwa (510 CE) and Narasiṃhagupta Balāditya (515 CE).⁶¹

⁵⁹ A.M. Chowdhury, 'Bengal and the Gupta Realm', in A.M. Chowdhury and Ranabir Chakravarti (eds), *History of Bangladesh: Early Bengal in Regional Perspectives Up to c. 1200 CE*, Vol. 1, Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 2018, p. 516

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, p. 517.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, p. 519.

The divided Gupta territory probably signified the decadence of the centralized state and paved way for the regional state formation. Though there is no direct evidence of Budhagupta's rule in Bengal, Arlo Griffith suggested by his reading of the Raktamala Inscription that the titles Paramabhaṭṭāraka and the Paramadeva in the inscription might refer to Budhagupta because the Gupta Era 159, mentioned in the text, corresponds to his reign (477-488 CE).⁶² The plate was issued from the *adhikaraṇa* (office) of the royal officer of the *vīthi* of *Madhyamaṣaṇḍika* favoured by the feet of Paramabhaṭṭāraka. The plate also refers to the *Kumāramatya* of the Raktamala-agrahāra and *Mahāmātra* (royal officer) of *Puṇḍravardhana*. Based on the reading of Griffith we can assume that the northern Bengal or *Puṇḍravardhana* continued to be under the Gupta rule at least till the 5th century CE.

The next Gupta ruler or a subordinate of the imperial Guptas was *Vaiṇyagupta* who is known from two copperplate inscriptions – *Gunaighar Copperplate* (507 CE) and another inscription of obscure origin describing the land grant to an *Ājīvika* congregation. The *Gunaighar* plate was issued from the victorious camp of *Kripura* by *Mahārāja Vaiṇyagupta*, a devotee of God *Mahādeva*.⁶³ It has been suggested by *Furui* that *Vaiṇyagupta* was a subordinate ruler under the Guptas as he has been referred to as *pañchādhikaraṇoparika*, *mahāpratihāra* and *mahārājā* instead of *mahārājādhirāja*.⁶⁴ His royal emblem was bull, unlike the traditional *Gaḍuḍa* emblem used by the imperial Gupta rulers. By the recent finding of another plate of obscure provenance, read by *Furui*, we come to know about *Vaiṇyagupta*.⁶⁵ The plate recorded the grant of land to the *saṃgha* of the *Ājīvika* monks at the abode of venerable *Maṇibhadra* in *Jayanatana* of *Purvamaṇḍala*. The plate also quotes an earlier ruler named *Mahārājā Maheśvara Nāthacandra* who constructed the abode of venerable *Manibhadra* and granted land for its maintenance and benefit of the *Ājīvika* *saṃgha* residing there. *Vaiṇyagupta*'s re-grant came 93 years after *Nāthachandra*'s grant (411 CE), affirming the domination of the former in the region held earlier by a ruler of a different dynastic

⁶² Arlo Griffith, 'Raktamala Copperplate of GE 159', in *Pratna Samiksha*, New Series, vol 6, 2015, pp. 15-27

⁶³ Shariful Islam, 'Political Entities in Southeast Bengal', in A.M. Chowdhury and Ranabir Chakravarti (ed), *History of Bangladesh: Early Bengal in Regional Perspectives Up to c. 1200 CE*, Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 2018, pp. 558-562.

⁶⁴ Ryosuke Furui, 'Ājīvikas, Maṇibhadra and Early History of Eastern Bengal: A New Copperplate Inscription of *Vaiṇyagupta* and its Implication', in *Journal of Royal Asiatic Society*, Series 3, 26, 4 (2016), pp. 657-681.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, p. 660.

identity. Vaiṅyagupata's name also appeared in a number of gold coins found from the region. R.C. Majumder pointed out that he granted land and issued gold coins with the title Dvādaśāditya. The research on the Kalighat Hoard of coins indicated that the three British Museum coins bear the name of Vaiṅyagupta in the obverse and Dvādaśāditya in the reverse.⁶⁶ However, Shariful Islam, after reading the Dvādaśāditya legend in the Kotalipara Copperplate, has put forward an alternative view that he was a different king.⁶⁷ He argues that Dvādaśāditya might belong to the same ruling dynasty shared by Dharmāditya and Gopacandra. This temporary line of rulers came to rule the Vaṅga region shortly after the Gupta Empire disintegrated.

The period between 300-700 CE marked a threshold time for the Indian politics and society when several distinctive features became noticeable in a changing socio-economic scenario. This transitional phase led historian to designate this period as early medieval phase in the history of Indian subcontinent. Shaping of regional society within a state formation process from local to supra-local to regional was the characteristic phenomenon during this period as pointed out by B.D. Chattopadhyaya. After the downfall of imperial Guptas, the whole of northern India was fragmented into several small states with a number of ruling houses - the Maukhārīs in the Ganga-Yamuna doab, the Puṣyabhūti in the upper Ganga valley, the Maitrakas in the western Malwa and the weakened descendants of the Gupta in the Magadha area. Bengal during this time too (late 6th and early 7th century CE) became divided into two prominent kingdoms: the kingdom of Samatata-Vaṅga and the kingdom of Gauḍa.⁶⁸ The kingdom of Gauḍa was comprised of the northern part of western Bengal and the whole of north Bengal. This was also the region where the imperial Guptas had stronger hold which continued till the time of Mahāsenagupta in the end of the 6th century CE. Mahāsenagupta was a formidable ruler who defeated Susthitavarman, the king of Kāmarūpa in a bloody battle on the bank of Louhitya (Brahmaputra River). The Doobi Copperplate of Bhāṣkarvarman attests to this invasion by the Gauḍa army leading us to infer that the valley of Brahmaputra on the borderlands of Bengal and Assam was a region of continuous contentions.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Susmita Basu Majumder, *Kalighat Hoard: The first Gupta Coin Hoard from Bengal*, Kolkata: Library of Numismatic Studies, 2014, pp. 29-30.

⁶⁷ Shariful Islam, 'Kotalipada Copperplate of Dvadasāditya', *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh (Humanities)*, Vol. 53, 2011, pp. 72-82.

⁶⁸ A.M. Chowdhury, 'Threshold of Regional Political Entity', in A.M. Chowdhury and Ranabir Chakravarti (eds), *History of Bangladesh: Early Bengal in Regional Perspectives Up to c. 1200 CE*, Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 2018, p. 530

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, p. 533.

The power of Mahāsengupta was repeatedly challenged from the western frontier by the Chālukya king Kīrtivarmana I, Maukhārī king Iṣāṇavarman and from the north by the Tibetan king Sron-bstan-sgam-po in the latter half of the 6th century CE.

In the beginning of 7th century CE, the existence of the Guptas in the Gauḍa region was completely shattered by Śaśāṅka who rose to power from an ordinary sub-feudatory in Bihar and came to control the better parts of western and northern Bengal along with Magadha. His capital was Karṇasuvarṇa in the present day Chiruti village of Murshidabad district, West Bengal. Under whose overlordship was Śaśāṅka acting as a subordinate sāmanta is a matter of debate with various historians claiming that he was either under the Maukhārī king Avantīvarman or the Gupta king Mahāsenagupta.⁷⁰ The two Medinipur Copperplates and Panchrol (Egra) Copperplate confirm that the feudatory rulers of southwestern coastal region known as daṇḍabhukti admitted his suzerainty.⁷¹ The Ganjam Plate of the Śailodbhava king Mādhavarājā (619 CE) found in the Kongoda area of southern Odisha also acknowledged the superiority of Mahārājādhirāja Śaśāṅka, attesting the expansion of his territory to further south. The four Soro Copperplates found near the Balasore district of Odisha also indicates that Śaśāṅka gradually expanded his control over Utkala, presumably by defeating the Mana dynasty of Dudhpani Rock Inscription.⁷² Śaśāṅka was also involved in his ambitious north Indian campaign against the Maukhārīs of Kanauj and the Puṣyabhūtis of Sthāneśvara by forming an alliance with Devagupta of Malwa. Baṇa in the several passages of the *Harṣacarita* narrated a vivid description of how Gauḍādhipati Śaśāṅka harassed the Puṣyabhūti rulers and treacherously killed Rājyavardhana in a battle in Malwa region. Śaśāṅka's campaign in the northern India, particularly against Harṣavardhana has also been described in the Tantric Buddhist text the *Āryamañjuśrīmūlakalpa*. The text however stated that Śaśāṅka (King Soma) was defeated by Harṣa and was forbidden to move out of his country. Though, both *Āryamañjuśrīmūlakalpa* and Xuanzang depicted Śaśāṅka as a staunch anti-Buddhist figure, Xuanzang saw many Buddhist vihāras near his capital Karṇasuvarṇa in the mid-7th century CE. Some historians like B.N. Mukherjee and Jahar Acharjee have suggested that Śaśāṅka's rule was extended even to some portion of the southeastern Bengal as a gold coin of the ruler was

⁷⁰ Chowdhury, 'Threshold of Regional Political Entity', p. 532.

⁷¹ R.C. Majumder (ed), 'Two Copper-Plates of Śaśāṅka from Midnapore', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal (Letters)*, Vol. XI, 1945, pp. 1-9, D.C. Sircar (ed), 'Egra Plate of the Time of Śaśāṅka', *Epigraphia Indica*, Vo. XL, 1974, p. 38.

⁷² Chowdhury, 'Threshold of Regional Political Entity', p. 537.

discovered from the Comilla region.⁷³ Shariful Islam suggested that the coin was probably issued after Śaśānka annexed Daṇḍabhukti and part of Odisha in his kingdom, though there is no other source to corroborate it.

After the death of Śaśānka, Kaṇḥasuvārṇa, the capital of Gauḍa fell under the control of Bhāṣkarvarman, the king of Kāmarūpa for a brief period. The Nidhanpur Copperplate of Bhāṣkarvarman implies that he captured Samatāṭa and extended his empire up to Kaṇḥasuvārṇa.⁷⁴ The fact is also corroborated by a large number of gold coins of Bhāṣkarvarman with Śrīkumāra legend, found from the southeast Bengal. The Badaganga Rock Inscription of Bhutivarman also suggests that the Southeastern Bengal came under the sway of the Varmans of Kāmarūpa.⁷⁵ The rule of the Varmans did not last too long in the Southeastern part of Bengal and Jivadharāṇa Rāta, probably a feudal king under the Varmans raised his head and established an independent kingdom in Samatāṭa. The Nāthas were also subordinate feudatories under the Varmans. Therefore, we can assume that after the fall of Śaśānka the Samatāṭa sub-region witnessed continuous war between several ruling dynasties contending for power.

Rise of an independent kingdom in the Vaṅga region can be observed in the 6th century CE after the Gupta supremacy had started to fade away. The kingdom had an obscure line of rulers including Gopacandra, Dharmāditya and Samācharadeva. Mostly known from the epigraphic sources like Kotalipada Copperplate Inscription of Dharmāditya and Gopacandra, Jayarampur Plate of Gopacandra, Mallasarul Copperplate of Vijayasena (mentioning Gopacandra), Gughrahati Copperplate of Samācharadeva, these rulers posed a great ambiguity in the dynastic history of Bengal in the post-Gupta context. Greatest number of these inscriptions were found from the Kotalipara area of the Gopalganj district of Bangladesh, leading us to infer that the Vaṅga sub-region was their principal heartland.⁷⁶ In the light of the absence of any data regarding the

⁷³ Jahar Acharjee (ed), *History, Culture and Coinage of Samatata and Harikela*, Vol. 1, Tripure: 2006, pp. 29-38. Shariful Islam, 'Unpublished Gold Coins of Śaśānka in the Bangladesh National Museum', in *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh (Humanities)*, Vol. 38, No. 2, 2013, pp. 363-368.

⁷⁴ P.N. Bhattacharyya, 'Nidhanpur Copperplate of Bhāṣkarvarman', in *Epigraphia Indica*, Vol. XII, 1913, 65-79.

⁷⁵ N.K. Bhattasali, 'Badaganga Rock Inscription of Bhutivarman', in *Epigraphia Indica*, Vol. XXVII, 1947-48, pp. 18-23.

⁷⁶ Shariful Islam, 'Political Entities in Southeast Bengal', A.M. Chowdhury and Ranabir Chakravarti (eds), *History of Bangladesh: Early Bengal in Regional Perspectives Up to c. 1200 CE*, Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 2018, p. 566.

predecessor or successor of these rulers, it is difficult to grasp the chronology and dynastic identity of these rulers. Following the discovery of another copperplate from the Ramshila village in Kotalipara area, the name of another king called Dvādaśāditya has come to the light.⁷⁷ The plate was issued from the Varākamaṇḍala viṣaya with a Gajalakṣmī legend on the top. According to Shariful Islam, Dvādaśāditya, styled as mahārājādhirāja, was connected to Dharmāditya's genealogy as Ramshila Plate bears striking similarity with the two other Dharmāditya plates. Both of them assumed the title of mahārājādhirāja and paramabhaṭṭāraka and compared themselves with traditional kings – Nṛga, Nāhusa, Yayāti, and Amvarīṣa. It is interesting to note that another ruler named Sudhany[āditya] known from the British Museum Gold Coins probably was also connected to this line of rulers. Shariful Islam suggested that Gopacandra and Samācharadeva hailed from a ruling dynasty different from the line of Dharmāditya, Dvādaśāditya and Sudhanyāditya.⁷⁸ Numismatic evidence of Gopacandra in the form of gold coins might also be found in the collection of Bangladesh National Museum, with weight standard common to the Samataṭa type. The provenance of his coins and inscriptions found from Mallasarul in Bardhaman district and Jayarampur in Balasore district suggest that he was ruling over a fairly large territory.⁷⁹

The Samataṭa sub-region witnessed the rise of several ruling dynasties throughout the 7th century CE like the Rāta, Nātha, Khaḍgas, the early Devas and the Chandras. Some of these dynasties ruled independently in the Samataṭa kingdom while others were ruling under the suzerainty of a supreme sovereign. Seventh century CE was marked by continuous struggle between different ruling houses to exercise control in the fluvial plains of southeastern Bengal. The earliest ruling house to exert their power in the sub-region after the Varmaṇs of Kāmarūpa was the Rātas whose lineage is principally known from the two epigraphic evidences: the Kailan Copperplate and the Udisvara Copperplates. The Kailan Copperplate was issued by Śrīdharāṇa Rāta and his father Jivadharāṇa Rāta.⁸⁰ The former assumed the titles *Samataṭeśvara* (the lord of Samataṭa) and *Prāpta-pañca-mahāśabda*. The Udisvara Copperplates recorded the land grant to Vappa Siṃha in the Guptinatana viṣaya by Śrīdharāṇa Rāta for the purpose of building a Buddhist

⁷⁷ Shariful Islam, 'Kotalipada Copperplate of Dvādaśāditya', *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh (Humanities)*, Vol. 53, 2011, pp. 72-82.

⁷⁸ Shariful Islam, "Political Entities in Southeast Bengal", pp. 569-571

⁷⁹ *Ibid*, p. 572

⁸⁰ D.C. Sircar, "The Kailan Copper-plate Inscription of King Śrīdharāṇa Rāta", in *Indian Historical Quarterly*, 1947, p. 2232.

monastery called Udvihāra.⁸¹ Śrīdharāṇa Rāta has been described as *parama-vaiṣṇava* and *puruṣottama* indicating his inclination towards Vaiṣṇavism. The name of Jivadharāṇa Rāta is also known from the Tippera Copperplate of Lokanātha and Gupta archer type gold coins issued by the king himself. The Rātas were probably supplanted by the Nāthas after a successful battle recorded in the Tippera grant.⁸² The dynasty was founded by Lokanātha followed by Lakṣmīnātha, Śrīnātha and Bhavanātha. The royal emblem of the Nāthas was Gajalakṣmī found in both Tippera and Kalapur Copperplate of Lokanātha and Marundanātha respectively.⁸³ After analyzing the use of titles like *sāmanta*, *mahāsāmanta* and *nṛpa*, scholars have suggested that the Nāthas were probably feudal chiefs of Samataṭa.

The Khaḍga rulers established power in the Samataṭa, probably supplanting the Rātas and the Nāthas during the latter half of 7th century CE with a power base at Karmanta (modern Barkamta in Comilla district) under Devakhaḍga.⁸⁴ The information on this lineage is primarily based on the two Ashrafpur Copper Plate Inscriptions.⁸⁵ Four copperplates from Salban Vihāra, Mainamati belong to Devakhaḍga and his son Rājrajabhaṭṭa and Balabhaṭṭa.⁸⁶ The Khaḍga lineage was started by Khaḍgodyama and followed by Jātakhaḍga, Devakhaḍga, Rājabhaṭa and Balabhaṭa. From the travelogue of Sheng-Chi who visited Samataṭa during the reign of Rājrajabhaṭṭa we come to know that the king was fervent worshipper of Triratna (three jewels of Buddhism) and played the part of a great upāsaka.⁸⁷ He used to make hundred thousand statues of Buddha with clay and used to read hundred thousand śloka from the *Mahāprajñāpāramitā-Sūtra*. He also used to take out procession with the image of Avalokiteśvara in the front and make pious gift.

Another ruling dynasty datable later than the Khaḍga in the mid-8th century CE were the early Devas. The lineage of this dynasty is known from a number of inscriptional and numismatic sources like the three Salban Vihāra Copperplate Inscriptions, the two Mainamati Copperplates of Ānandadeva and Bhavadeva and the gold coin hoard found from one of the monastic cells of

⁸¹ Shariful Islam, “Udisvara Copper Plate of Śrīdharāṇa Rāta”, in *Journal of Asiatic Society of Bangladesh (Humanities)*, Vol. 57, No. 1, 2012, pp. 61-72.

⁸² Shariful Islam, ‘Political Entities in Southeast Bengal’, p. 579.

⁸³ R.G. Basak, ‘Tippera Copper plate Grant of Lokanātha’, in *Epigraphia Indica*, Vol. XV, pp. 301-315

⁸⁴ Shariful Islam, ‘Political Entities in Southeast Bengal’, p. 583.

⁸⁵ G.M. Laskar, *Memoirs of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, Vol. 1, 1905, pp. 85-91.

⁸⁶ K.M Gupta, ‘Two Mainamati Copper Plate Inscriptions of the Khaḍga and Early Deva Times’, *Bangladesh Archaeology*, Dhaka: 1979, pp. 141-143.

⁸⁷ P.C. Bagchi, ‘Religion’, in R.C. Majumdar (ed), *History of Bengal*, Dhaka, 1943, p. 418

Salban Vihāra.⁸⁸ The lineage was established by Śāntideva and followed by Viradeva, Ānandadeva and Bhavadeva. Traditionally the capital of the early Deva rulers was situated in the Devaparvata identified with the Lalmai-Mainamati range. However, Mainamati Grant of Ānandadeva informs that during his reign the capital was transferred to the Vasantapura presumably because of the imminent threat by the Varmaṅs of Kāmarūpa referred to as the Mleccha chief.⁸⁹ Both Ānandadeva and Bhavadeva referred to themselves with the titles of Parameśvara, Paramabhaṭṭāraka and Mahārājādhirāja indicating that they were sovereign kings. They also used the Gupta-styled epithets of *Vaṅgāla-Mṛgāṅka* engraved on their coins.⁹⁰ This might indicate that their rule was stretched up to the Vaṅga sub-region.

The genealogy of the Candra can be furnished from the Mainamati inscriptions and they are believed to have ruled the Samataṭa region in 7th-8th century CE but with no certain year. The Candra genealogy is primarily constructed by the epigraphical sources like Edilpur Inscription, Kedarpur Copperplate of Śrīcandra, Dhulla Plate of Śrīcandra, Pashcimbhag Copperplate of Śrīchandra, three Mainamati Copperplate of the Chandras. The Chandras used *Dharmacakra* seal flanked by two deer on the top of their copperplates. They used the epithets like *parameśvara*, *paramabhaṭṭāraka* and *mahārājādhirāja*. The early Candra rulers were ruling from the capital of Rohitgiri identified with different places like Lalmai Hills of Comilla, Tippera-Arakan hilly region and Harikela region. However, during the reign of Śrīcandra the capital was shifted to Vikramapura in the Vaṅga sub-region from Rohitgiri for a better administrative location of the expanding Candra territory.⁹¹ The genealogy recorded in the copperplates of rulers draws their descent from Pūrṇacandra, followed by Suvarṇacandra, Trailokyacandra, Śrīcandra Kalyāṅcandra, Laḍahacandra and Govindacandra. Śrīcandra is believed to have started the historical lineage.⁹² The family was initially Buddhist in affiliation while Laḍahacandra was a Vaiṣṇava. Rajat Sanyal is of the opinion that their original base was at Vikramapura while Śrīchandra made his presence

⁸⁸ Shariful Islam, 'Political Entities in Southeast Bengal', p. 598.

⁸⁹ Ibid, p. 601.

⁹⁰ B.N. Mukherjee, *Coins and Currency System of Post-Gupta Bengal (c. AD 550-700)*, New Delhi: 1993, p. 60.

⁹¹ Shariful Islam, 'The Chandras', in A.M. Chowdhury and Ranabir Chakravarti (eds), *History of Bangladesh: Early Bengal in Regional Perspectives Up to c. 1200 CE*, Vol. 1, Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 2018, p. 619

⁹² Harunur Rashid, "The Mainamati Inscription", in Enamul Haque (ed) *Hakim Habibur Rahman Commemoration Volume*, Dhaka: ICSBA, 2001, p. 217

felt in the Southeastern border. Govindacandra, the last member of the Candra dynasty is said to be defeated by Rajendrachola in the latter's inscription (1021).⁹³ During the rule of Pāla ruler Rajyapala II, Gopala II and Bigrahapala II the Pāla-Chandra conflict in the eastern sector of delta intensified. The claims in the plates of Śrīchandra attest that at the end of Gopala II's reign the Chandra lineage gained independence in Southeastern region.⁹⁴ The Devas used to rule between the late 8th and early 9th centuries. The Deva rulers have been divided into two lines – the early Devas and the later Devas. We have Ānandadeva, Bhabadeva and Kāntideva among the early Devas, while Viradharadeva and Raṇavankamalla belonged to the later Deva line.⁹⁵ Ānandadeva and Bhabadeva were evidently stationed at Devaparvata while Kāntideva issued land grant charter from Vardhamanapura in Harikela.⁹⁶

From 8th century CE onwards the dominant political dynasty that came to rule in Magadha and the Barind region was the Pālas. The Pāla period was fairly well documented by both contemporary source as well as subsequent historical accounts. Contemporary sources include the royal copper plate inscriptions and other inscriptions such as those on the images. The colophons of the Buddhist manuscripts and various texts like *Rāmacarita* too are important source for Pāla genealogy. Later historical accounts are found in Tibetan and Muslim sources. The abundance of materials does not mean that the Pāla chronology can be asserted without any obscurity, rather scholars are frequently in disagreement over the readings of inscriptions and in many cases the data seems to be ambiguous. Some of the main problems of Pāla chronology are that there are different kings by the same names mentioned in different inscriptions in different periods like three Gopālas, three Vighrapālas, two Mahipālas and two Śūrapālas. The image inscriptions are also non-specific in their reference.⁹⁷ According to Rajat Sanyal the main problems of properly reconstructing the Pāla genealogy is the method of recording dates in the inscriptions in terms of

⁹³ Rajat Sanyal, 'The Pāla-Sena and Others', in Dilip K. Chakrabarti and Makkhan Lal (eds), *History of Ancient India, Vol. 5: Political History and Administration (c AD. 750–1300)*, New Delhi: Vivekananda International Foundation and Aryan Books International, 2014, p. 189

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 188

⁹⁵ Harunur Rashid, "The Mainamati Inscription", p. 218

⁹⁶ Rajat Sanyal, "The Pāla-Sena and Others", p. 170

⁹⁷ Susan Huntington, *The Pāla-Sena School of Art*, Leiden: Brill, 1984, p. 20.

their ruling years instead of any particular system of known reckoning like the Vikrama or the Saka era.⁹⁸

The Pāla chronology has been widely researched by a number of scholars since the beginning of 20th century. Mention might be made of Rajanikanta Chakravarti (1907 & 1909), Ramaprasad Chanda (1912), Rakhal Das Banerjee (1914), R.C. Majumdar (1943), N.R. Ray (1949), D.C. Sircar (1975), Abdul Momin Chowdhury (1967), B.M. Morrison (1970). The chronology has been reshaped radically since the first publication on the subject due to the discoveries of new inscriptions. Relying on textual sources like the *Rāmacarita* and *Āryamañjuśrīmūlakalpa* for this purpose has been denounced by the majority of historians since the scientific method of reconstructing the genealogy through reading and collating different inscriptions was suggested by D.C. Sircar. Sircar's method has been accepted by the scholars as a standard mean to determine the chronology.

The Pāla dynasty was founded by Gopāla (750-775 CE) after being elected to the throne by the people who wanted to restore law and order in the society which was suffering from anarchy (mātsanyāya) after the death of Śaśāṅka. Bengal's division into four kingdom – Puṇḍravardhana, Karṇasuvarṇa, Tāmralipti and Samatāṭa was recorded by Xuanzang who visited immediately after the death of Śaśāṅka (638 CE). A passage in the *Āryamañjuśrīmūlakalpa* referred to the King Jayanāga who has been identified with the Jayanāga of Vappaghoshavata Copperplate granting land to a feudatory chief in the Audumbarika viṣaya from the victorious camp of Karṇasuvarṇa.⁹⁹ Coins issued by Jayanāga has also been found from the western Bengal. Other parts of Bengal were also subjected to the invasion of Varmaṇs of Kāmrupa and Puṣyabhūti of the Kanauj. Vākpatirāja's Gauḍavaho also narrated an incident where the king of the Gauḍa was defeated and killed by YasoVarmaṇ.¹⁰⁰ However, Yashovarman's victory was short-lived as he was supposedly defeated by Lalitāditya Muktapida of Kashmir as recorded by Kalhan. Whether Lalitāditya's direct rule was established in Bengal is a matter of debate. The *Rājatarāṅgīnī* however mentions that troops of elephant from the Gauḍa maṇḍala joined Lalitāditya's army and the king of Gauḍa was

⁹⁸ Rajat Sanyal, "The Pāla-Sena and Others", p. 175

⁹⁹ A.M. Chowdhury, "Pāla Realm: Making of a Regional Political Power", in A.M. Chowdhury and Ranabir Chakravarti (eds), *History of Bangladesh: Early Bengal in Regional Perspectives Up to c. 1200 CE*, Vol. 1, Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 2018, p. 692.

¹⁰⁰ Chowdhury, "Pāla Realm", p. 693

forced to visit Kashmir and was murdered there.¹⁰¹ Lama Tāranātha's account also suggests that immediately before Gopāla came to power there was no king in the Vaṃgala for many years and the people were living in an utter lawlessness. Gopāla's succession to throne has been dated by D.C. Sircar in 750 CE after studying a number of inscriptions including the Indian Museum Copper Plate of 26th ruling year of Dharmapāla and the Khalimpur Copper Plate of the same ruler. The Buddhist *Āryamañjuśrīmūlakalpa* of 7th – 8th centuries CE also records a situation of “mutual distrust, raised weapons and mutual jealousy” after the death of Soma i.e. Śaśānka.¹⁰² Despite, all the evidence of an anarchical situation in Bengal and subsequently Gopāla's ‘election’ to power, A.M. Chowdhury has critically reexamined all the data and concluded that “such a social contract origin of the Pāla rule is far-fetched and presupposes a political outlook far in advance.”¹⁰³

Gopāla was succeeded by Dharmapāla (775-812 CE) from whose reign the actual political history started. Dharmapāla was succeeded by Devapāla (812-850 CE) and Śūrapāla I (850-858 CE), the son and grandson of Dharmapāla respectively. They ascended the throne and ruled in Bihar-Bengal in 9th century CE. After this the line of Dharmapāla closes and that of his younger brother Vākpaḷa begins. The discovery of the Jagajjīvanpur Copper Plate of Mahendrapāla has reshaped the Pāla genealogy drastically. Mahendrapāla, who was earlier regarded as the Gurjara Pratihāra king by R.D. Banerji has been now identified as a Pāla ruler. So, Mahendrapāla ruled for fifteen years between Devapāla and Śūrapāla I. The copper plate also brought the name of another Gopāla, son and successor of Śūrapāla I ruled for at least four years. This Gopāla had to be numbered as Gopāla II and son of Rājyapāla came to be known as Gopāla III who was earlier considered to be Gopāla II.¹⁰⁴ On the basis of Jagajjīvanpur Copper Plate Rajat Sanyal argues that a) Mahīpāla II and Śūrapāla II also have to be included in the list of kings immediately preceding Rāmapāla, b) Rājyapāla, son and successor of Nārāyanapāla has now to be called Rajyāpala II and c) Vighrapāla II has to be given the status of a ruling king for no less than 12 years.¹⁰⁵ Devapāla's religious leanings and patronage towards Buddhism is well known from the Ghosrawan Eulogy which records Devapāla's favour to Viradeva, a Buddhist preceptor and Nālandā Plate which refers

¹⁰¹ Chowdhury, “Pāla Realm”, p. 693

¹⁰² Sanyal, “The Pāla-Sena and Others”, p. 173

¹⁰³ Chowdhury, “Pala Realm”, p. 698.

¹⁰⁴ Sanyal, “The Pala-Sena and Others”, p. 177

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, p. 180.

to a grant of five villages to the monastery at Nālandā constructed by Southeast Asian Śailendra ruler Balaputradeva.

After Śūrapāla I the following came to rule – Vighrahapāla I (858-860), Nārāyanapāla (860-917 CE), Rājyapāla (917-952 CE), Gopāla II (952-972 CE), Vighrahapāla II (972-977 CE), Mahīpāla I (977-1027 CE), Nayapāla (1027-1043 CE), Vighrahapāla III (1043-1070 CE), Mahīpāla II (1070-1071 CE), Śūrapāla II (1071-1072 CE), Rāmapāla (1072-1126 CE), Kumārapāla (1126-1128 CE), Gopāla III (1128-1143 CE), Madanapāla (1143-1161 CE), Govindapāla (1161-1165 CE), and Pālapāla (1165-1199 CE). Vighrahapāla I is considered to be the initiator of the second line of Pāla rulers but some historian is of opinion that Nārāyanapāla started this line.¹⁰⁶ His copperplate grant in north Bihar proves that he enjoyed dominance over entire Bihar and passed it on to his son Rājyapāla II. The latter's rule was extended from Magadh to the North Bengal attested by the Bhaturiya inscription from the Rajshahi district¹⁰⁷. Mahīpāla I's reign was marked by some important political events. Firstly, the temporary defeat inflicted on the Pālas by Kalachuri Gaṅgeyadeva was quickly retaliated by Mahīpāla I and secondly, the inscription of Rajendrachola dated 1021 CE records utara Rāḍha's ruler Mahīpāla's defeat at the hand of Rajendrachola.¹⁰⁸ His son Nayapāla ruled for at least fifteen years and his epigraphic documents are spread over western Bengal to south Bihar. The encounter and negotiations between the Pāla and the Kalachuri polities continued till the time of Nayapāla and he is described in the Kalachuri inscription to be defeated by Gaṅgeyadeva's son Karṇa who took over the territory of Gauḍa and Vaṅga. Rāmapāla's reign was marked by the Kaivartta rebellion of the varendra region which he subsequently subdued with the help of his other feudatories. At the same time with rebellion his kingdom was raided by Raṣtrakūta Śivarāja and the Vaṅga king Harivarma of eastern Bengal.¹⁰⁹ The last known paramount ruler of the dynasty was Madanapāla. The Gahadavala king Govindachandra issued his Lar Plate from his base at Mudgagiri which shows that the Pāla were losing control in the Magadha region. In Rāḍha region also Vijayasena, the founder of Sena dynasty exerted periodical blow to the Pāla supremacy.

¹⁰⁶ Sanyal, "The Pala-Sena and Others", p. 187.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, p. 187.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, p. 189.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, p. 190.

There were some other contemporary local lineages during the Pālas of whom Kamboja and Varman dynasties/rulers can be mentioned. The Kamboja ruling dynasty is known from the epigraphic record from the south western Bengal and their base was at a place called Priyaṅgu in Odisha. Two inscriptions from the Irda and Kalanda of the time of Nayapāla in the 11th century are known and they record donation within Daṇḍabhukti (Present day Dantan). The Varmaṅ family on the other hand started by Harivarman followed by his brothers Samalavarman and Bhojavarman who ruled during the 11th-12th centuries CE.

The weakening political base of the Pālas paved way for the rise of a dynasty in Bengal with Sena name endings. There are about twelve copperplates of the Sena rulers known till date belonging to the late 11th to the early 13th centuries. The Deopara eulogy of the Vijayasena is so far accepted as offering the most comprehensive genealogy of the Senas.¹¹⁰ The lineage started with Vīrasena, followed by Sāmantasena and Hemanatasena. The first scion of the monarchy was Vijayasena who was a contemporary of the Pāla king Madanapāla. They proclaimed themselves as *brahma-kṣatriya* originating from the south India and Śaiva by belief. The military prowess of the Vijayasena was claimed in the eulogy by his victory over Madanapāla of Gauḍa, Rāghava of the Choḍagaṅga dynasty and several kings of Kāmarūpa and Kaliṅga.¹¹¹ His son Vallālasena was credited with the annexation of south Bihar as known from Sanokhar indription. The Vallalacharita described that he also occupied Vaṅga, Varendra and Rāḍha. His son Lakṣmaṅasena assumed the title Gauḍeśvara and also erected two pillars of victory at Banaras in the Gahadavala territory and in Puri after seizing Kaliṅga. However at the same time the copperplate (1175 CE) of the Gahadavala king Jayachandra has been discovered near Patna, indicating that the boundaries of the two kingdoms probably overlapped. Lakṣmaṅasena was succeeded by Viśvarūpasena who fled to eastern Bengal after the Islamic invasion in 1206 CE. The later Sena rulers like Suryasena and Keśavasena continued their rule for some time in eastern Bengal.

1.3 Condition of Buddhism in early medieval Bengal

To illuminate on the condition of Buddhism prevailing in Bengal in the preceding period of the Pālas we have the travelogues of Chinese pilgrims like Xuanzang and Yijing whose accounts

¹¹⁰ Aksadul Alam, “Deopara Prashasti”, in Sirajul Islam; Ahmed A. Jamal (eds.), *Banglapedia: National Encyclopedia of Bangladesh* (Second ed.), Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 2012.

¹¹¹ Sanyal, “The Pala-Sena and Others,” p. 194.

are invaluable for writing history of Buddhism during the 7th – 8th centuries CE. Xuanzang recorded a first-hand experience of almost all the chief centers of Buddhism in Bengal. At Kajangala near Rajmahal he saw six or seven Buddhist monasteries which contained over three hundred brethren. At Puṇḍravardhana there were 20 Buddhist monasteries and 3000 brethren who followed the Mahāyāna and Theravāda.¹¹² The biggest establishment at about 3 miles west of the capital city of the Puṇḍravardhana there was the magnificent po-shi-po monastery which had spacious hall and tall storied chambers. The condition of Buddhism in Karṇasuvarṇa, Samatāṭa and Tāmralipta are of no less flourishing. In Samatāṭa there were more than thirty Buddhist monasteries with about 2000 brethren of the Sthavira school.¹¹³ In Karṇasuvarṇa he observed more than ten monasteries with about 2000 brethren of Sammatiya school and in Tāmralipta more than ten monasteries with 1000 brethren.¹¹⁴ Near the capital of Karṇasuvarṇa the pilgrim saw the lo-to-mo-chi monastery with a magnificent establishment and a resort of illustrious brethren. This monastery according to Xuanzang was built by a local king to commemorate the memory of a Buddhist *śramaṇa* from south India.¹¹⁵ Ta cheng-teng also stayed in Tāmralipta for twelve years and acquired an extensive knowledge about Sanskrit texts.¹¹⁶ He explained Nidānaśāstra by Ullaṅga after his return to china. He also became a follower of Sarvāstivādīn School from here.

Yijing came to Tāmralipta in 673 CE and met Ta cheng-teng there in a vihāra called po-lo-ho.¹¹⁷ He stayed there for some time and learned Sanskrit and translated the Sanskrit text of *Nāgarjuna-bidhisattva-suhrillekha* in Chinese. Sheng chi who was present in India about the time of Khaḍga ruler Rājarājabhaṭṭa (7th century CE) recorded important piece of evidence on the condition of Buddhism in Samatāṭa. The king of the country at this time was Rājabhaṭṭa who used to take out procession with the image of the Avalokiteśvara in the front and make pious gift. In the city there were more than four thousand monks and nuns in his time. Regarding different schools of Buddhism Xuanzang tells us that there are both Theravada and Mahāyāna in Puṇḍravardhana, Sammatiya School in Karṇasuvarṇa, the Sarvāstivādīn school in Tāmralipta and in the Mahāyāna

¹¹² Samuel Beal (tr. and ed.), *Su-Yu-Ki: Buddhist Record of the Western World Translated from the Chinese of Hiuen Tsang*, Vol. II, Delhi: Orient Books Reprint Corporation [1884], 1968, p. 194.

¹¹³ Ibid, p. 199.

¹¹⁴ Ibid, 201.

¹¹⁵ P.C. Bagchi, 'Religion', in R.C. Majumder (ed), *History of Bengal*, Vol 1, pp. 413-414

¹¹⁶ J. Takakusu (tr and ed), *A Record of the Buddhist Religion as Practiced in India and Malay Archipelago (AD 671-695)*, Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1966, p. xxx.

¹¹⁷ Ibid, p. xxxi.

school in Samatāṭa. Although Yijing tells us that all the four schools i.e. the Mahāsaṃghika, Sthavira, Sarvāstivāda and Sammatīya were found in eastern India side by side with other schools, there is no positive evidence about this.

The seventh century CE description of Xuanzang and Yijing about the major Buddhist centers of Bengal almost rules out any presence of tantric practices in the Buddhist monasteries or among the Buddhist monks. Instead, the Buddhist practice and ritual recorded by Xuanzang and Yijing indicate to the solid foundation of Vinaya rule in the east Indian Buddhist religious sphere. In the Puṇḍravardhana, Xuanzang recorded that the priests of the saṅghārāmas used to follow little and great vehicle.¹¹⁸ The monks of the Bhasu Vihāra too followed the rule of the Mahāyāna. In the kingdom of Samatāṭa, Xuanzang noticed that the inhabitants of the Saṅgharama adhered to the Sthavira school.¹¹⁹ Some of the professors of Samatāṭa also followed the false doctrine. In Kaṇṣasuvārṇa too, he noted that the ten saṅghārāmas were following Little Vehicle of Sammatīya School. However, the Buddhist sacred place in Kaṇṣasuvārṇa was also simultaneously dwelt by a group of heretics. Xuanzang noted a thrilling account of a debate between such a heretic leader and a forest dweller śramaṇa who secured a victory and then Buddhist law prevailed in the country.¹²⁰

Yijing mentioned a number of important monastic ritual and practice during his visit in Bengal in the 7th century CE. These rituals however did not seem to be any transgressive practice like tantra. Instead the rituals were deeply rooted in the Mahāyāna norms for the monastic community. Yijing mentioned five kind of consecrated grounds for the purpose of erection of a Buddhist monastery. In all the consecration methods, the vikṣus used to chant a mantra standing on the ground to be consecrated. These consecration rules were very much similar to the ceremonies described in the four Nikāyas.¹²¹ There were several other rules observed by the monks in the Buddhist monasteries like the summer retreat, Pravarna Day, custom of salutation etc. With regards to the ordination process to become a monk in the Buddhist vihāra, Yijing mentioned that such process must be observed in the presence of a teacher.¹²² The candidate or the *Upāsaka* was

¹¹⁸ Samuel Beal (tr. and ed.), *Su-Yu-Ki: Buddhist Record of the Western World Translated from the Chinese of Hiuen Tsang*, Vol. II, Delhi: Orient Books Reprint Corporation [1884], 1968, p. 195

¹¹⁹ Ibid, p. 199.

¹²⁰ Beal (tr. and ed.), *Su-Yu-Ki*, pp. 202-203.

¹²¹ J. Takakusu (tr and ed), *A Record of the Buddhist Religion*, pp. 83-84.

¹²² Ibid, pp. 95-101.

not the member of the seven associated assemblies of the vihāra. The candidate under the guidance of the teacher had to shave his hair and take a bath in the private place and then he was offered a *nivasana* or under-garment and an upper cloak. After putting on his cloak he received a bowl and was now given the designation of Pravrajita or homeless priest. Then in the presence of the teacher or *Upādhyāya*, the Ācārya or the principal imparts to him the ten precepts or śikṣapādas. Yijing also mentioned that there were several layers of novice who wanted ordination like śramanera, and śramanerī whose ordination process involved transgression of the twelve particular set forth in the Vinaya text. In the case of the Śikshamanas, they were considered to be guilty if they failed to keep the last five particular of the twelve precepts. However, nowhere in the ordination process there was any mention of transgressive tantric practice, leading us to believe that the Buddhist monastic landscape in the 7th century CE was dominated by the Mahāyāna norms and practice.

The major religious orders were passing through an important phase of transformation in the early medieval period. This transformation is evident from the composition of large number of Buddhist Tantra texts like the *Guhyasamājatantra*, the *Cakrasaṃvaratantra*, the *Hevajratantra*, the *Sādhanamālā*, the *Caryāpada* etc. from 8th century CE onwards.¹²³ This was also an ubiquitous literary culture noticeable in the early medieval Śaiva and Śākta tantric orders. The religious culture reflected in the Sanskrit Buddhist texts and their ideology and practice were radically different from Mahāyāna Buddhism of earlier period. The presence of the ritualistic and esoteric practices in the huge textual corpus evidently suggests the rise of a culture of tantra in the major religious orders. The large corpus of Buddhist images coming from different parts of Bengal from 8th century CE onwards also attests to this trend of religious orientation with new deities like Hevajra, Kurukullā, Hayagrīva appearing on the scene.

The new features of Buddhist tantrism, distinctive from the earlier doctrine of Mahāyāna Buddhism of which it was an offshoot, were gradually taking shape. We find substantiation of this phenomenon in the light of literary and sculptural evidence. But the principal question was to explore the factors that prepared the ground for the emergence of the ‘obscure religious cult’ which introduced goddess worship, psychic practices, cults of magic, sorcery and necromancy within the classical religious order that had kept its distance far from such practices for long. The question is

¹²³ David B. Gray, ‘The *Cakrasaṃvaratantra*; Its History, Interpretation and Practice in India and Tibet’, in *Religious Compass* 1/6 (2007), p. 696

also whether some traits could be observed within the peripheries of the earlier faith and practices. We must note here that Buddhist tantrism was not only confined to theorizing mysticism or magical practices for the ascetic *sādhakas*, but produced prescriptive texts for worshipping the deities in Tantric method. Some Tantric work of fine scholastic merit travelled all the way from Bengal to Tibet as the most sacred texts. The physical remains of this complex religious practice in the form of Buddhist images are also available from different corners of Bengal. It can be regarded as a complex development where the method of different meditative practices were formulated which were kept secret within the circle of the preceptor and his disciple. We find the mention of at least 600 deities in the *Niṣpannayogāvalī* of Abhayākargupta which also proves to be an authoritative text on designing of maṇḍalas.¹²⁴ Some historians are of opinion that the phenomenon is a conglomeration between the Mahāyāna Buddhism and separate esoteric cults, peripheral in nature, prevailing beyond the fold of mainstream religions like Buddhism. Some scholars are even eager to identify the tantra cult as part of the original order dating back to the time of the Buddha. We shall try to trace the theological, philosophical and devotional developments in the subsequent chapters.

The proliferation of Buddhist activities in eastern India is often credited to the active patronage of the Pāla rulers. However, the Pāla rulers' patronage for Buddhism has been critically studied recently by a few scholars. The Pāla kings called themselves *Parama-saugata* and the Buddha was invoked regularly at the beginning of their official records. The Pāla inscriptions, reflective of great literary creativity,¹²⁵ were hardly informative about the conditions for the progress of and patronage for Buddhism. There are at least twenty-four landgrants issued to both the Brahmanical and Buddhist institutions under the Pāla rulers.¹²⁶ A considerable amount of the Pāla landgrants, especially those granted to the religious institutions, mentioned the high officials like *mahāsāmanta* and *mahāsenāpati* as the donors. Though the Pāla rulers were known to have erected Buddhist monasteries like Somapura and Vikramaśilā, none of them directly issued any

¹²⁴ Benoytosh Bhattacharyya (ed. and tr.), *Niṣpannayogāvalī of Mahāpaṇḍita Abhayākara-gupta*, Baroda: Oriental Research Institute, 1949, p. 19.

¹²⁵ Priyankara Chakraborty, *Tracing the History of Literary Culture in Early Medieval Bengal, in the Light of Inscriptions (6th century to 13th century CE)*, Unpublished PhD Thesis, Jadavpur University, 2022, p. 149

¹²⁶ Sayantani Pal, 'Religious Patronage in the Land Grant Charters of Early Bengal (Fifth–Thirteenth Century)', *Indian Historical Review*, 2014, 41(2), p. 187.

landgrants to the Buddhist institutions. Rather all the Buddhist landgrants were issued by their subordinates like *mahāsamanta*, *mahāsenāpati* and *mahāsainyapati* as pointed out by Sayanatani Pal.¹²⁷ The Pāla landgrants were primarily concentrated in the Varendra region (Northern part of Bengal) under the Puṇḍravardhana sub-region. On the other hand, the landgrants of local ruling dynasties like the Candras, the Devas of Paṭṭikerā, Nātha, Rāta and the Khaḍgas were all concentrated in the southeastern part of Bengal under the Samataṭa sub-region. The Gunaighar Plate recorded the earliest evidence of landgrant in this region. In western and southwestern parts of Bengal under Vardhamānabhukti and Daṇḍabhukti sub-regions land grants were issued as early as 550-625 CE by Gopacandra mentioned in Jayarampur and Mallasarul Copper Plate Inscriptions. This region also includes the Raktamrittika Mahāvihāra situated near ancient Kaṇṇasuvārṇa. Traces of different phases of human settlement in the adjacent mounds like Nilkuthidanga and Raksasidanga occurred from 2nd century to 7th century C.E.¹²⁸ The Murshidabad Plate of Dharmapāla was also collected from Kaṇṇasuvārṇa which mentioned issuance of land to the Buddhist saṃghas to construct a perfumed chamber (*gandhakuṭī*) and a small vihāra (*vihārika*).

The Pāla rulers sponsored the erection of many Buddhist monasteries like Vikramśilā, Nālandā, Somapura, Odantapuri. These monasteries have been the breeding grounds of early medieval Buddhist scholarly texts. Students from different parts of India and from Tibet flocked in large number to these monasteries. P.C. Bagchi had observed that Buddhism in this period seems to have undergone changes and was very different from what Xuanzang saw. The ancient schools like Sammatiya and Sarvāstivāda were no longer spoken of in eastern India.¹²⁹ Bagchi further argued that the Pāla inscriptions, apparently invoking the pure form of Mahāyāna Buddhism, may not have reflected the actual picture of Buddhist practices of the times.

1.4 Rise of tantra in the context of early medieval state formation in Bengal

The period from 600-1300 CE in the Indian subcontinent was marked by the emergence and proliferation of several regional powers. The structural changes in the polity of this period are

¹²⁷ Pal, “Religious Patronage in the Land Grant Charters”, p. 187.

¹²⁸ Somreeta Majumder, “Locating the Monastery in Landscape context: A Preliminary Study of the Raktamrittika Mahāvihāra of Kaṇṇasuvārṇa”, *Journal of Multi-disciplinary Study in Archaeology*, 2019, 7: 633.

¹²⁹ P.C. Bagchi, “Religion”, in R.C. Majumder (ed), *History of Bengal*, Vol. 1, Patna: N.V. Publication (reprint), 1978 p. 416

believed to have emanated from the absence of a paramount power in the whole of the subcontinent and prevalence of multiple powers engaged in hostility. To explain the nature of the socio-political changes in early medieval period, R.S. Sharma has shown the existence of a decentralized polity with the apex power distributed hierarchically among several feudatory bodies. Due to the decentralization of the supreme sovereign power, there arose many *sāmantas* who assumed power in different regions.¹³⁰ The political dismemberment, according to Sharma was part and parcel of an acute social crisis known as the Kaliyuga crisis depicted in the contemporary Purāṇic sources. The Purāṇic literature connected the weakening political authority to the degeneration of the *varṇāśramadharmā* and the king's supposed failure to perform the responsibility of the Kshatriya i.e. maintain law and order and protect personal property. As a result, the coercive authority (*daṇḍa*) of the king was drastically reduced and he became increasingly dependent on the Brāhmaṇa grantee for collecting revenue. The land endowments to the Brāhmaṇas on the other hand conferred them with local administrative and judicial rights. The shrinkage of the coins and currency compelled the king to pay the state officials in landed property. The early medieval polity also developed an inherent mutually dependent system of *Sāmanta*. In the context of Bengal, we might note that Rāmapāla of the Pāla dynasty had to donate sizable land to a large number of *sāmanta* to recover Varendri from the control of the Kaivartas.¹³¹

Instead of following the model or perspective which proposes decentralization of supreme power as a precondition for the rise of regional states and societies, we may observe the early medieval scenario in Bengal as characterized by steady expansion of monarchical state system from within the region.¹³² The growing number of regional powers and rapid increase of land grants led to the rise of many centres of power controlling a vast hinterland, giving rise to subregional power centres. The Gupta copperplates from Bengal provide ample evidence of donation of uncultivable land (*khila kṣhetra*) to the Brahmanical and Buddhist communities which transformed the unsettled areas into settled agrarian society. Epigraphic evidence from the mid-6th century demonstrates the initiation of processes of sub-regional state formation in Vaṅga, Rāḍha,

¹³⁰ Sharma argued that Bengal was an example of feudal polity. For details see, R.S. Sharma, *Indian Feudalism c. AD 300-1200*, New Delhi, 1980 (2nd edition).

¹³¹ Ranabir Chakravarti, "State Formation and Polity," in A.M. Chowdhury and Ranabir Chakravarti (eds), *History of Bangladesh: Early Bengal in Regional Perspectives Up to c. 1200 CE*, Vol. 1, Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 2018, p. 877.

¹³² Chakravarti, "State Formation and Polity," p. 878.

Puṇḍravardhana and Samataṭa. The administrative structures were primarily modelled after the administrative structure of the Guptas. In the Vaṅga sub-region we find the existence of a structured polity under the kingship of Dvādaśāditya, Dharmāditya, Gopacandra and Samācharadeva. Gopachandra's rule also extended to the Vardhamānabhukti and Daṇḍabhukti of Rāḍha as attested by the Mallasarul and Jayarampur Grants. The local administration was using the adhikaraṇa as a medium to interact with the local people.¹³³ Puṇḍravardhanabhukti continued to be the highest administrative unit in the sub-region ruled by an uparika appointed by the king. The governors of the Vardhamānabhukti and Daṇḍabhukti also enjoyed the position of the subordinate rulers. The administrative units lower than the bhukti were viṣaya and vīthi functioning at the supra-village level and managed by the viṣayapatis. For example, the Varākamaṇḍalaviṣaya of the Kotalipada Copperplate Inscription was ruled by viṣayapati Pavitraka. The authority in charge of the adhikaraṇa functioning under the viṣaya was known as Jyestha kāyastha or adhikaraṇika, adhikaraṇikajana (Faridpur CPI) and karaṇika (Ghugrahati CPI). In the Rāḍha sub-region, the administrative units functioning under the bhukti were Vakkattaka vīthi (Mallasarul CPI) and Ekatakakaviṣaya (Panchrol CPI). The administrators in charge of these lower units were probably kumāramātya and viṣayapatis. The clerical groups working as recordkeepers in the adhikaraṇas of the Rāḍha sub-region were known as pustapāla and sthayipāla. The land sale grants from 6th – 8th centuries show the striking presence of rural landed magnates known as mahattara who constituted an assembly with the adhikaraṇa. The urban elites known as kuṭumbins who played pivotal role in the transaction and featured widely in the earlier land sale grants were conspicuously absent in the later grants.¹³⁴ The nexus between the landed magnates and the clerical groups of the adhikaraṇa enhanced the power of the latter in the matters of land related transactions.¹³⁵

From 8th century CE onwards the state formation process took a new turn in terms of the changing local power relations as the ruling dynasties of this period like Pālas and Candras enjoyed monopoly over issuing copperplate grants. The rural influential sections from the Puṇḍra, Vaṅga and Rāḍha were no longer the decision makers of land donation during this period.¹³⁶ The

¹³³ Ryosuke Furui, *Land and Society in Early South Asia: Eastern India 400-1250 AD*, New York: Routledge, 2020, p. 86.

¹³⁴ Ibid, p. 91.

¹³⁵ Ibid, p. 97.

¹³⁶ Ibid, p. 131.

subordinate rulers, who were exercising authority in land sale process till 7th century CE, virtually lost their control and became mere petitioners. The Pālas inscriptions on the other hand conveyed all matters related to land transactions directly addressing the royal officials, subordinates and local residents, thereby signifying an ‘enhanced state control’ over the rural society. The donees continued to enjoy extensive privilege over the donated land and the incidences of religious landgrants increased. The donees enjoyed exclusive right over the grass land, pasture and water bodies which were previously being controlled by the community of local residents. They retained the right of employment of labour and extraction of production in the granted land. The injunction imposed by the copperplate charters on the local cultivators compelled them to obey the donee and offer him share of their production. The income of the donees in the Pāla landgrants constituted of tax (kara), share of agricultural products (bhāga), periodical offerings (bhoga) and taxes in grain and cash (karahiranya).¹³⁷ The early Pāla grants like those inscribed on the Indian Museum Copperplate and the Khalimpur Copperplate mentioned four categories of people as noted by Furui.¹³⁸ They were: (a) dependents of the kings (rājāpādopajīvin) like rājā, rājanaka and rājaputra, (b) the rogue warriors like cātas and bhātas, (c) local administrative agents (viṣayavyāvahārīns) like jyeṣṭhakāyastha, mahattara, mahāmahattara and (d) residing cultivators. Most later Pāla grants like the Mohipur Grant of Gopāla II refer to two categories of people. The first was the royal officials (rājapuruṣa) like rājā, rājanaka, rājaputra, mahāsāmanta and cāṭa, bhāṭa, and communities like the Gauḍas, Mālavas, Khasas etc. The second category was constituted of the Brāhmaṇa mahattamas and kuṭumbins in the top hierarchy and medas, andhrakas and caṇḍālas in the lowest stratum of the social ladder. Roughly, similar hierarchised categorization of people might also be noted in the Candra copperplates like the Pashcimbhag Copperplate of Śrīcandra and Mainamati Copperplate of Laḍahacandra.¹³⁹

The regional state formation was instrumental in creating resource base for the regional polities. The principal nature of this change was to create a politico-administrative integration as B.D. Chattopadhyaya had noted. The integration of the non-sedentary polities into state structure simultaneously created a space for absorption of autochthonous cults into the established dominant

¹³⁷ Furui, *Land and Society in Early South Asia*, p. 132.

¹³⁸ *Ibid*, p. 133

¹³⁹ *Ibid*, p. 137.

religious orders, especially within the Brahmanical socio-religious structure.¹⁴⁰ The phenomenon might be termed as cult appropriation which also accompanied the proliferation of jāti system resulting into the processes of accommodation of the hitherto untouched aboriginal population within the state society. The temples and the maṭhas became the hubs of the sectarian bhakti cult which constituted the key factor in the consolidation of the Brahmanical rituals accompanying the ongoing process of local power formation. Evidently, the two principal components of the early medieval state formation in the subcontinent were the temporal and the sacred domains as pointed out by B.D. Chattopadhyaya. The two domains developed a complex symbiotic relationship where the temporal power needed ‘legitimization’ from the spiritual power and the spiritual authority required sustenance from the temporal power.¹⁴¹ Beyond this ‘legitimization’ process, Chattopadhyaya proposed to look into the intricacy of the ideological dimension of the state which was not only about the physical protection of the subject but also about the protection of the ideal social order.¹⁴² The ideal social order determined by the priestly forces was not guided exactly by the older ideals prescribed in the *Dharmaśāstra* but had undergone several stages of development highlighting the crystallization of the Purāṇic order and the ascendancy of ‘Bhakti ideology’.¹⁴³

Purāṇic ideas, norms and practices ran parallel with rising forms of tantrism and other heterodox devotional forms. Deep penetration of tantrism in the religion seems to have established links with the state formation process. The sheer omnipotence potentially embedded in the tantric esoteric practices could be found to resonate with the rising regional temporal power.¹⁴⁴ This has been amply demonstrated in the tantric Buddhist text *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa* where the text narrates how the kings secured their rule over their respective kingdoms by performing specific rituals. The Chakravartīn mantra and the Vidyārāja mantra taught by the victors were prescribed to be performed on auspicious times by the supreme ones for the purpose of securing unchallenged rulership.¹⁴⁵ King Sagara accomplished the mantra of Sitātapatrā, King Dilīpa accomplished the one syllable mantra, Māndhātṛ accomplished the mantra of Unnātoṣṇīṣa, King Dhundhumāra

¹⁴⁰ B.D Chattopadhyaya, *The Making of Early Medieval India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012, p. 203.

¹⁴¹ Ibid, p. 205.

¹⁴² Ibid, p. 206.

¹⁴³ Ibid, p. 207.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 209.

¹⁴⁵ T. Ganapati Sastri (ed. and tr.), *Āryamañjuśrīmūlakalpa*, Trivandrum: Superintendent Government Press, 1920, 53.359

accomplished the mantra of Jayoṣṇīṣa, King Kāndarpa accomplished the mantra of Vijayoṣṇīṣa, his son Prajāpati accomplished the mantra of Locana in order to rule their kingdoms and ascend to heaven.¹⁴⁶ Thus, a curious relationship between the mantra and attainment of political power was demonstrated in the *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa*. The text thus could be seen to be a product of the rising scene of regional political formations. There were earlier strains of tantra that could be traced from the early 5th century CE. Several Buddhist dhāraṇī texts composed over the centuries and located in the different centres of Buddhism, from Gāndhāra, Gilgit to Tibet contained important rituals, performed exclusively for the protection of political power or the potentate. The texts like *Suvarṇaprabhāsottamasūtra* (early 5th century CE), *Mahāmāyāvijayāvāhinīdhāraṇī* and the *Mahāsaharsapramardanasūtra* (late ninth century CE is the earliest date for both) included ritual instructions for the protection of political authority.¹⁴⁷ These texts often narrated several stories regarding particular kings, who were able to secure their rule and kingdoms from the attack of their enemy by reciting the dhāraṇī formulae. Complex ritual practices had been prescribed in these texts to gain the ultimate effect. Protection of political potentates through mantra and rituals was also projected in the earlier texts like the *Bhaiṣajyagurusūtra* (probable date before 7th century CE), *Prajñāpāramitā* (6th – 7th centuries CE)¹⁴⁸, *Ratnaketu-parivarta* (part of the Gilgit manuscripts of early date translated into Chinese by the 6th – 7th centuries CE)¹⁴⁹ etc.¹⁵⁰ These texts promised attainment of political potency through the magical powers of the tantras and proposed for such gains as victory in the battlefield, continued control over polity and safety of the kingdom which were enabled through following the right ritual path. It is clear that the orientation to establishing political legitimacy had been potentially present in the earlier and early medieval Mahāyāna sutras which employed the mode of magic and ritual to impress the importance of the faith.

¹⁴⁶ The *Āryamañjuśrīmūlakalpa*, 53.360

¹⁴⁷ Gergely Hidas, “Buddhism, Kingship and the Protection of the State: The *Suvarṇaprabhāsattomasūtra* and the Dhāraṇī Literature,” in Dominic Goodall et al. (eds), *Śaivism and the Tantric Traditions: Essays in Honour of Alexis G.J.S. Sanderson*, Leiden: Brill, 2022, pp. 237-238.

¹⁴⁸ This particular *Prajñāpāramitā* was found in the Gilgit manuscript. See, Gregory Schopen, *The Bhaiṣajyaguru-sūtra and the Buddhism of Gilgit*, Unpublished PhD Thesis, 1978, Australian National University. The final phase of the development of the *Prajñāpāramitā* tradition (600-1200 CE) was marked by the emergence of the tantra elements. For details see, Edward Conze, *The Prajñāpāramitā Literature*, Tokyo: The Reiyukai, 1978, p. 23.

¹⁴⁹ Yenshu Kurumiya, ‘Ratnaketu-parivarta: Sanskrit and Tibetan Texts’, unpublished Ph.D thesis submitted to the Australian National University, 1974, Part I, p. iii.

¹⁵⁰ Hidas, “Buddhism, Kingship and the Protection of the State”, p. 240

State formation process in early medieval Bengal created an interactive arena between the classical religions and the local, indigenous or popular cults. In greater Bengal, the expansion of the state society into the non-state society initiated the process of brahmanisation during the Gupta period through the landgrants. Brahmanism was firmly established in the madhyadeśa from where it spread into outlying regions. The interaction between the Brāhmaṇas and the aboriginals in the peripheral areas led to the incorporation and appropriation of the autochthonous cults.¹⁵¹ In Bengal, Odisha and adjoining areas of Madhya Pradesh the state formation process led to close contacts between the agents of the state and the brāhmaṇa donees of landgrants on the one hand and the Śabarās and other forest dwellers, on the other – whose presence can be sometimes gleaned in the early medieval inscriptions.¹⁵² The expansion of the statal social order into the tribal belts led to peasantization, increase in the fold of the Śūdra varṇa and the creation and proliferation of jāti. The processes struck root in the regional and subregional soil through myriad modes of negotiations. The roots of Tantrism, deemed as a binary opposite of Brahmanism, has often been sought within these negotiatory processes.

R.S. Sharma had contended that tantrism travelled from outlying regions to the Madhyadeśa through the brahamans.¹⁵³ The social and religious adjustments made by the Brāhmaṇas in the outer regions were considered to have initiated a deviation from the orthodox path. This perhaps led Hemādri, a 13th century commentator from the Deccan to state that the brāhmaṇas of Aṅga, Vaṅga, Kaliṅga, Saurāstra, Gurjara, Ābhīra, Koṅkana, Drāviḍa and Avanti should be avoided.¹⁵⁴ In Magadha, Odisha, Bengal and Assam the existing Buddhist background gave rise to the Vajrayāna tantrism which accommodated new people and modified the hierarchical Mahāyāna Buddhism by embracing the several elements of lower order. The institutions of tantra like the maṭhas, temples and preceptors were supported by land grants. This also inextricably foregrounded the rise of tantra in the regional state formation process. The tantric monastic organization and the divine pantheons were found by some scholars to have reflected the social and administrative hierarchy current within the early medieval social and political systems. We find several graded ranks among the initiated and the texts prescribing the consecration of the

¹⁵¹ R.S. Sharma, *Early Medieval Indian Society: A Study in Feudalisation*, New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2001, p. 239

¹⁵² Ibid, p. 243

¹⁵³ Ibid, p. 243.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid, p. 242.

Ācāryas with relations of hierarchy within the order. In the hierarchy of the pantheon of tantrism, ancient divinities associated with nature were given subordinate positions as vassals, servants, doorkeepers, dikpālas whereas Śiva and Viṣṇu came to the forefront.¹⁵⁵ The hierarchical pantheon was not confined to the male deities, but also encompassed goddesses like Dūrga and Tārā.

The geographical landscape of the cult of Purāṇic mother goddess might be attributed to the eastern part of the subcontinent like Nepal, Assam, Bengal, Odisha and Bihar which were traditional strongholds of the śāktas. Sharma has noted that this is particularly significant because these areas were not adequately brahmanised till the 6th century CE. The concentration of aboriginal tribes can be observed in Assam, Andhra Pradesh, Tamilnadu, Kerala, eastern part of Madhya Pradesh, south Bihar and the neighbouring area of Odisha and West Bengal. The locations of the leading tantric pīṭhas in these regions also indicate the links between aboriginal cults and the rising early medieval cult of mother goddess. The Kubjikāmata Tantra, according to H.P. Sastri, enumerates five pīṭhas: Oḍiyana in Odisha, Jala in Jalandhar, Purāṇa in Maharashtra, Mātaṅga in Śrisailam and Kāmākhyā in Assam.¹⁵⁶ The *Hevajra Tantra* mentions only four holy pīṭhas: Jalandhar, Oddiyana (swat valley), Purnagiri and Kāmarūpa.¹⁵⁷ The list is repeated with slight variation in the *Kālikā Purāṇa* a work of the 10th century and also in the 11th century Buddhist anthology, the *Sādhanamālā*. In addition, *Hevajra Tantra* lists twenty-one other places as the meeting grounds of yoginī. Many of these upapīṭhas, kṣetras and upakṣetras including Devikota and Harikela were situated in Bengal while others can be identified in south and south-eastern India. The traditional number of the Śākta pīṭhas was ten in the initial period and it showed a steady growth throughout early medieval period eventually numbering 108.

The tantric ritual traditions and the regional polities seem to evolve into symbiotic links with mutual beneficiary or sustaining networks of relations. Indeed the regional cults emerged more powerful through successful sociopolitical negotiations. The texts often reflect these tendencies.

¹⁵⁵ Sharma, *Early Medieval Indian Society*, p. 262.

¹⁵⁶ H.P. Sastri, *A Catalogue of Palm-leaf and Selected Paper MSs (Belonging to the Durbar Library), Nepal*, Calcutta: Baptist Mission Press, 1905, p. LXXVIII.

¹⁵⁷ D.L. Snellgrove (ed. and tr.), *The Hevajra Tantra*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959, p. 70.

Many elementary components of the Buddhist tantra rituals were believed to have originated by borrowing heavily from the Śaiva tantra.¹⁵⁸ The parallel of the tantric Śaivism might be found in various tantric Buddhist ceremonies like offering initiation by introduction before a maṇḍala, the central and subsidiary deities of a Buddhist maṇḍala etc. Apart from attaining Buddhahood, other supernatural effects of the tantric rituals, like gaining supernatural power (siddhi), averting of danger (śāntih), harming of enemies (abhicārah), control of the rain (varṣāpaṇam) etc. were performed through symbolically appropriating the Śaiva rituals. Sanderson has noted that the *Mahāvairocanābhisambodhi*, the first major tantra in the Caryā class, bears the evidence of absorbing and adapting non-Buddhist elements in the textual body.¹⁵⁹ The text contained a cautious message that the teaching might be challenged by the people of the inferior faith on the ground that it belongs to the outsider.¹⁶⁰ In the *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa* too there was an assimilated version of the cult of vāmasrotah where the mantras of Tuṃburu and his four sisters were incorporated as the highest secret of all the non-Buddhist mantras.¹⁶¹ The success of Śaivism in appealing to the royal and elite patrons stemmed from its body of rituals and theories that were oriented to legitimize, empower and promote the social, political and economic processes of hierarchization of power in the early medieval period. Sanderson stresses on Śaiva order's ability to match new religio-political needs by providing the political potentates with a new concrete set of rituals and socio-religious services. Buddhism initially may have competed with Śaivism for royal patronage in eastern India and imitated the Śaiva pattern of divining rituals in order to meet the new religio-political needs, as we have referred above. Although the early strains of political elements in Buddhist sūtras emerged through long time and in a expansive geography, there was a gradual concentration of the Mahāyāna – Mantranaya in the eastern Asia and eastern South Asia in the early medieval times. The Buddhist Mantranaya system portrayed in the *Krṣṇasamgrahapañjikā* of Kuladatta and *Vajrāvalī* of Abhayākaragupta, adopted a host of Śaiva

¹⁵⁸ This argument has been put forward by Alexis Sanderson. For details, see Alexis Sanderson, “The Śaiva Age: The Rise and Dominance of Śaivism during the Early Medieval Period”, in Shingo Eino (ed), *Genesis and Development of Tantrism*, Tokyo: Institute of Oriental Culture, University of Tokyo, 2009, p. 128.

¹⁵⁹ The text has been spatially contextualized in early medieval Bengal. For details see, Stephen Hodge (tr), *The Mahā-Vairocana-Abhisambodhi-Tantra: With Buddhaguhya's Commentary*, New York: Routledge, 2003, pp. 14-24.

¹⁶⁰ Sanderson, “The Śaiva Age”, p. 128.

¹⁶¹ Ibid, p. 129.

tantric ceremonies for patrons in the public domains like consecration of temple images, the paṭa paintings, the manuscript writings, the monasteries and the funerary practices for the monks.¹⁶²

The expanding early medieval states penetrated into the newer territory and created new urban bases and rural hinterland for revenue expansion leading to an expansion of the agrarian base. The monarchical polities were based on the brahmanical political ideals of statehood where the model of varṇāśramadharmā emerged as the theoretical goal promoted. In effect, such polities promoted or patronized the values of the Brahmanical society and this was quite evident in the large numbers of landgrants made to brāhmaṇa donees and temples. The new class of sovereigns endeavoured to give material form to the socioreligious institutions by erecting royal temples in the nuclear area and lesser temples in the peripheral zones, the maintenance of which were secured by the endowment of lands. The ceremonial repertoire of these temple included special rituals for the king and for the elites. The endowments made to the Buddhist establishments, although much less evident in our context, may have sought to fulfill such roles. We have been informed by Tārānatha that the fire ritual was performed by the Vajrācārya in the Buddhist monasteries for the benefit of the political dynasties. Two more texts, the *Sarvavajrodaya* of Ānandagarbha and *Guhyasamājamaṇḍalavidhi* of Dipaṅkarabhadra at Vikramśīla inserted ancillary rites specifically for averting danger from befalling the monarchs.¹⁶³ In the *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa* and *Sarvadūrgatipariśodhanatantra* the kings in particular and the royalty in general were envisaged as the primary initiates, a rite that was an adoption of the Śaiva practice of maṇḍala initiation. A few particular sections of these texts designate the kings as the principal attainees of ritual consecration with the promised benefits like protection to self and kingdoms and the destruction of enemies. The influential tantric manual of *Sarvavajrodaya* by Ānandagarbha (9th century CE) outlined detailed practical guidance for the performance of such initiatory rituals. The author prescribed the preparation of maṇḍala of different sizes for the initiation of the monarchs, feudatories (sāmānta and mahāsāmānta), merchants (śreṣṭhi and sārthavāha), and ordinary tantric practitioners (sādhaka). The size of the maṇḍala was hierarchically designed for each of the key

¹⁶² Sanderson, “The Śaiva Age”, p. 126.

¹⁶³ Ibid, p. 106.

players in the social order, with the largest maṇḍala assigned to the monarch and the smallest to the ordinary practitioner (sādhakas).¹⁶⁴

1.5 The social stratification and social characteristics of the Buddhist tantra

After the decline of the Gupta power in the mid-6th century CE the sub-regions of Puṇḍravardhana, Vaṅga and Rāḍha witnessed the emergence of sovereign kingships. The most significant social feature during 6th century CE onwards was the rise of the landed magnets as observed by Furuī from the extant inscriptions of this period.¹⁶⁵ The most dominant class of landed magnets were known as mahattaras who along with adhikaraṇas collectively acted as receiver of petition for land sale grants. The assembly of landed magnets in the Vaṅga regions included viṣayamahattara, mahattara and phalkas who worked at the varākamaṇḍala viṣaya, an administrative sub-division. In the Vardhamāna bhukti of Rāḍha sub-region also we come across the presence of mahattara and other local magnets acting with the adhikaraṇa. The similar dominance of the landed magnets can be observed till early 7th century CE in the Rāḍha region as attested by the Panchrol Plate during the time of Śaśāṅka. This inscription records the existence of a caṇḍālapuṣkarīni (pond for the caṇḍālas) as the demarcating boundary of the donated area. This is the first epigraphic record in Bengal which mention caṇḍāla as a social group which acquired the feature of a jāti in 7th century CE Bengal. A separate pond meant for the caṇḍāla suggests that they were treated as untouchables. The presence of the clerical group of kāyasthas and adhikaraṇikas who performed the clerical functions in the adhikaraṇas, can be observed in the Varākamaṇḍalaviṣaya. The increasing mention of several marginal autochthonous group in the land grant inscriptions was due to the expansion of the state society in the non-state domain.

The agrarian expansion in the eastern Bengal during 7th century CE showed a different trend under the hierarchical political structure. The Tippera Plate of Loknātha informs that forest tracts were turned into agrarian land initiated by the sub-ordinate rulers who constructed brahmanical temple in the forest.¹⁶⁶ The Nidhanpur plate of Bhāskarvarman also shows that marshy tract of Srihaṭṭa, a peripheral area of the eastern Bengal was donated to more than 208

¹⁶⁴ Sanderson, “The Śaiva Age”, p. 125.

¹⁶⁵ Ryosuke Furuī, “Social Life: Issues of Varṇa-Jāti System,” in Abdul. M. Chowdhury and Ranabir Chakravarti (eds.), *History of Bangladesh*, Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 2019, p. 51

¹⁶⁶ Ibid, p. 53

Brāhmaṇas. This process must have brought the forest dwellers in close contact with the sedentary agrarian society which was encroaching on the space of the non-sedentary society. In similar fashion the Ashrafpur Plate of Devakhaḍga shows that cultivated land plots of several villages were being donated to the Buddhist monastery.¹⁶⁷ The monastery was given the right to actual cultivation and the power to alienate some portion of the land wielded by the royal family. Furui has noted that the prominent social groups of these regions and their inter relation showed no sign of the varna order. Only exception was the Brāhmaṇas who were expressing their identity by referring to the gotra, pravara and Vedic school they belonged to.

The agrarian social relation in the early medieval Bengal under the Pālas was characterised by the existence of different strata based on land relations as delineated by Furui after extensive study of the Pāla inscription. The system was evidently coercive as we find the mention of *Catas* and *bhatas*, two classes of people whose position was right after the royal officer and who are described as rogues or soldiers harassing rural population.¹⁶⁸ The social change in early medieval agrarian society of Bengal, argued by Furui, was two-fold. On the one hand the local notables seem to have lost their distinguished position in relation to local affairs at the supra-village levels. On the other hand, the stratification among residents of the rural society intensified and the non-sedentary groups newly incorporated into the fold of sedentary society were labelled by the derogatory terms like *medas*, *andhras* and *caṇḍālas*.¹⁶⁹ Several fringe group of the society like the *dombās* with the synonyms of *mātaṅgī* and *caṇḍālī* were incorporated in the rural agrarian society. The stratification in the agrarian group is also indicated by the reference to the lower-class cultivators called *pāmars*. They have been described as being summoned by the *hālikas* and reluctantly coming to the field which shows the subordinated position of the former to the latter.¹⁷⁰ This hierarchy and discrimination in terms of both social status and wealth might provide us with a clue regarding the discontent and anxiety among a large section of people who probably embraced Tantrism. The evidence that these marginal people were leaning towards Tantra can be

¹⁶⁷ Furui, “Social Life”, p. 54

¹⁶⁸ Ryosuke Furui, “Agrarian Society and Social Groups in Early Medieval Bengal from a Study of Inscription”, in B. D. Chattopadhyaya, Suchandra Ghosh and Bishnupriya Basak (eds), *Inscriptions and Agrarian Issues in Indian History: Essays in Memory of D. C. Sircar*, Kolkata: The Asiatic Society, 2017, p. 170

¹⁶⁹ Ibid, p. 172

¹⁷⁰ Ibid, p. 173

demonstrated from a verse of Caryāpada, composed by the Sahajiya Buddhist sect, where *ḍombā* women (*ḍombī*) are often referred to as a metaphor of Śūnyata or Nairātma, an important goddess we find in the *Sādhanamālā*.¹⁷¹

The Brahmanical norms of social stratification were not being strictly followed in the early medieval society of Bengal as pointed out by Furuī from his study of the Bengal inscription. The ownership of landed property, rather than conventional *varṇa* duties, was an important determinant of the social status in the stratified society. The Khalimpur Copper Plate mentions that landed magnets like *jyesthakāyastha*, *mahāmahattara*, *mahattara* and *daśagrāmika* used to enjoy higher power and status than the *karṣakas* (cultivator) and *Brāhmaṇas*.¹⁷² The inscriptions from 8th century CE onwards also mentions varied categories of local residents like *mahattamas*, *uttamas*, *kutumbins* of higher *varṇa* and *medas*, *andhrakas* and *caṇḍālas* of lower *varṇa* who were not mentioned in the previous inscriptions. This implies the growing stratification of society as perceived by the state power. The evidence of the presence of 36 *varṇas*, as described in Bengal Purāṇas of 13th century, occurs arguably in the Irda Copper Plate of Kamboja king *Nayapāla* which mentions the donated village of *Bṛihacchattivaṇṇa*.¹⁷³ Taking reference from this particular copper plate Furuī has argued that the term *varṇa* and *jāti* were being used interchangeably in Bengal as the 36 non-brahmanical caste group were being referred to as *vanna*.

The Candra copper plate inscriptions possibly delineate a less stratified society in *Vaṅga*, *Samataṭa* and *Srihaṭṭa* than the *Varendra* region. The three primary categories mentioned in the Candra plates are *janapadas*, *kṣetrakāras* and *Brāhmaṇas*. The *janapada* meaning people formed a separate social group in the rural society distinguished from cultivators or *kṣetrakāras*. The *Pashchimbhag* Copper Plate of Śrīcandra only mentions all of these three categories as local residents. Nevertheless, the copper plate mentions diverse social groups like *kāyasthas*, *gaṇakas*, *vaidyas*, who formed the literate social groups and *mālākāras*, *tailikas*, *kumbhakāras*, *carmakāras*, *sutradharas* etc. under different professional groups. The size of the plot held by one in the rural agrarian set up implied one's actual status in rural society which may not correspond to the ritual status. In some cases, the size of the plot assigned to a non-*Brāhmaṇa* person is bigger than the

¹⁷¹ Furuī, "Agrarian Society and Social Groups", p. 173.

¹⁷² Furuī, "Social Life", p. 55

¹⁷³ *Ibid*, p. 57

plot of a Brāhmaṇa.¹⁷⁴ The Pashcimbhag Copper Plate also significantly shows that the non-Brāhmaṇa professionals were assigned plots of land larger than the plot of the allotted to an individual Brāhmaṇa. This indicates, as Furui has argued, that land holding signified one's actual status in the rural society which may not correspond to the ritual status in the normative treatises. The upward mobility of the different lower castes can be attested by the kaivartas. They were denoted as fishers or boatmen in the earlier prescriptive texts like the *Manusmṛti*. A 9th century CE landgrant of the Gopāla II from the Varendra region states that they were one of the lowest categories of the society along with medas, caṇḍālas and andhras. Later the Belwa and Rangpur plates of Mahīpāla I during 10th century suggest that the kaivartas were becoming land holders to some extent.¹⁷⁵

The cult of mother goddess assumed an extraordinary character as manifested in both the Buddhist and Brahmanical texts from 6th century CE onwards. The cults may have originated mostly among the lower orders of the society. Most of the dominant Śākta deities of Brahmanism and the Tārā cult in Buddhism could be arguably traced back to the aboriginal cults. The names of the Buddhist mother goddesses like Vetālī, Chasmārī, Śabarī, Caṇḍālī and Ḍombīnī in *Hevajra Tantra*, an 8th century CE text with connection to the eastern India, indicates that the deities were of aboriginal origin.¹⁷⁶ The same may be traced in the conception of Parṇaśabarī, the Buddhist goddess of epidemic who probably originated from the śabaras, a forest dwelling community of eastern India. In a number of Śākta tantric texts we find similar appropriation of aboriginal deities into the tantric fold like Kālī and Pārvaṭī who were associated with kols and śabaras in the 8th century CE text of *Gauḍavaho*.¹⁷⁷ Similarly, the 7th century CE text *Harivaṃśa* propounded that the goddess was worshipped by the śabara, pulinda and Barbara, all of whom belonged to the lower and non – caste social arena, later absorbed by the state society. Śakti is identified as Mātaṅgī, a social community of lower caṇḍāla order as found in the early genres of texts like the epics and the jātakas and mentioned in an inscription of Madhya Pradesh which shows that originally the goddess belonged to Mātaṅga tribe.¹⁷⁸ Caṇḍālī was the other name for her as she was the goddess

¹⁷⁴ Furui, “Social Life”, p. 58.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid, p. 60.

¹⁷⁶ D.L. Snellgrove (ed. and tr.), *The Hevajra Tantra*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959, pp. 14-15.

¹⁷⁷ R.S. Sharma, *Early Medieval Indian Society: A Study in Feudalisation*, New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2001, p. 245.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid, p. 245.

of the caṇḍālas. According to the *Kulārṇava Tantra* the goddess Śakti is represented by Caṇḍāli, Carmakārī, Māgadhī, Pukkaṣī, Svāna, Khāṭṭakī, Kaivartī, Vaiṣyāyoṣitah, Kauṇḍakī, Sauṇḍikī etc each of whom is initiated in tantra, mantra, yoga and mudra and observes the samayācara.¹⁷⁹ These names and icons along with Tārā, Bheruṇḍā, Bagalā and Cāmuṇḍī were of non-sanskritic origin and several of them were named after the tribes to which they originally belonged.

Some tantric texts show conspicuous trends which were probably associated with particular tribes. For example, *Mātaṅgaparameśvara Tantra* was evidently composed to serve the need of the Mātaṅgas living in eastern Madhya Pradesh and Andhra.¹⁸⁰ Some of the *Śabara Tantras* as pointed out by Chintaharan Chakravarty contained mantras composed in dialects of regional languages.¹⁸¹ R.S. Sharma was of the opinion that the origin of the kula practices prescribed in the *Kulārṇava Tantra* could be attributed to the Kola tribe who inhabited the vast tract from eastern Madhya Pradesh up to Bengal and Assam.¹⁸² They are presented as a fallen warrior tribe or mixed caste. R.P. Chanda quoted several passages from the medieval texts to show that the Pañcarātras were originally considered to be a non-Vedic sect by the orthodox sects. By referring to Sāmba Purāṇa and the Kūrma Purāṇa, Chanda argued that several categories of tantra were considered to be practiced by those who had strayed from the classical religions and were affiliated to the cults popular among the low-caste people.¹⁸³ Even though the tribal goddesses were adopted in the Brahmanical society, they continued to carry the stigma of their origin. Thus, the *Jayadrathayāmala Tantra* of the 12th century propounds that in order to worship Parameśvarī Kālī it was necessary to go to the houses of oilmen and potters and the goddess was to be worshiped in their company. A lot of the tantric literature was composed to serve the needs of bringing the tribal, the lower castes and the outcastes into the society under the fold of assimilated cults. This seems to have happened with the Buddhist Hevajra Tantra which was sanskritized later.¹⁸⁴

¹⁷⁹ Sharma, *Early Medieval Indian Society*, p. 246.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid, p. 244.

¹⁸¹ Chintaharan Chakravarty, *The Tantras: Studies on their Religion and Literature*, Calcutta: Punthi Pustak, 1963, p. 86.

¹⁸² Sharma, *Early Medieval Indian Society*, p. 249.

¹⁸³ R.P. Chanda, *The Indo-Aryan Races*, Rajshahi: Varendra Research Society, 1916, p. 126.

¹⁸⁴ R.S. Sharma had argued that it shows serious defects in rhythm because it was initially composed in dialect.

The reciprocal and interactive spaces within which the religious processes got unfurled in early medieval Bengal can probably be best understood through a thorough study of the Bengal *upapurāṇas* like *Brahmavaivarta*, *Bṛhaddharma* and *Devibhāgavata* as accomplished by Kunal Chakrabarti. We can take recourse to his findings to get to a closer understanding of the situation. He had argued that, “through the codification of these *Purāṇas*, the *brahmaṇas* attempted to construct an ideological system which eventually became co-existent with the regional tradition of Bengal.”¹⁸⁵ The *Brāhmaṇas* were eager to enter into a dialogue with the indigenous population of the peripheral area like Bengal which had so far been an untouched ground for *vedic* culture. The *vedic* rituals in the *Purāṇas* diminished progressively and local rituals gradually found a place instead. Some of these texts even started to recognize tantric practice at the beginning of the tenth century. Regarding the composition of eight *upapurāṇas* Chakrabarti suggested that they are regionally identifiable and they were composed in the area peripheral to brahmanical sphere of influence. Moreover, *upapurāṇas* never followed the *pañchalakṣaṇa* in order to adapt the requirements of local cults and the religious needs of sects other than those already assimilated in the *Mahapurāṇas*. The Purāṇic literature therefore was a medium of absorption of local cults and associated practices.

The contemporary tantric Buddhist texts also shows similar imprints of the lower grade of society. Many of the Buddhist siddhācāryas seem to have hailed from the lower varṇa background like Ḍombī, Śabara, Camarī, Tāntī, Tilo, Śāli, Dhobī, Kambala, Kuṭhāri, Jalandharī, Bāgurī, Teli etc. They belonged to the occupation groups – castes of corpse-carrier, leather worker, washermen, oilmen, tailors, fishermen and so on. A few of them, despite being brahmin like Saraha, became an outcaste by choice, ridiculed the Brahmanical norms and married lower-caste women. The *Hevajra tantra* also regarded everyone as a potential Buddha and did not discriminate against the lower caste. Many of these siddhācāryas took radical stands against the orthodox notions of religion. For example, Tilopā in one of his caryā forbade the worship of the chief brahmanical deities like Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Maheśvara or to visit a tirtha which had become epitomic of devotion.¹⁸⁶ Instead, he propounded that supreme knowledge was attained by realizing the non-

¹⁸⁵ Kunal Chakrabarti, *Religious Process: The Puranas and the Making of a Regional Traditions*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 8

¹⁸⁶ N.N. Bhattacharyya, *History of the Tantric Religion: A Historical, Ritualistic and Philosophical Study*, New Delhi: Manohar, 1982, p. 290.

dual nature of the universe. Though the tantric religion has often been bracketed as the “religion of masses”¹⁸⁷ or “Lokāyata”, it simultaneously shows an ambivalence of both orthodox and heterodox ideas. The paradox of Buddhist tantra therefore might not be unquestionably regarded as an admixture of marginal regional elements alone. We have tried to trace the origins of Buddhist tantra far earlier within the more classical arena of Buddhism and tried to tease out the deeper social and spiritual connections which may have emerged from negotiations with grassroots or the common social elements and concerns.

Conclusion

During the Gupta and the post-Gupta periods Buddhist ritual and monastic landscape predominantly showed the currency of Mahāyāna tendencies as attested by the Chinese travelogues of Xuanzang and Yijing. However, from the 8th century CE onwards, a few new Buddhist texts and images with specific characters, linked together in a paradigm designated as tantra, were gradually making a foothold within Buddhism in our context. The personal religious leanings or political patronage of the different rulers to the Buddhist congregation however did not directly favour the rise of tantric element. The religious landgrants indirectly facilitated an integrative process where the mainstream monastic order came in close contact with the aboriginal elements. The nomenclature of the Buddhist deities like Parṇasābarī, Caṇḍālī and Mātāṅgī, etc. evidently indicates their grassroots links. During the Pāla period the nature of Buddhism assumed a multi-dimensional character. On the one hand there were the Buddhist Vihāras which were sponsored and patronized by the Pāla rulers mainly through the subordinate officials, on the other, new Sanskrit Buddhist texts and anthologies began to be composed and compiled which reflected the development of mystical features within the main religious order. The visible Buddhist culture in the royal epigraphs and Buddhist Vihāra were more of Mahāyānic nature and cannot be regarded as sole representative of whatever was happening in the wider socio-religious arena. The possibility of teasing out the rise of tantric elements from a search into the orbits of the vihāras and Buddhist religious edifices will be explored in the next chapter.

¹⁸⁷ Bhattacharyya, *History of the Tantric Religion*, p. 281.

CHAPTER TWO

The Vihāras: Searching for the Sacred Landscape of Buddhist Tantra

The most obvious visible remains of institutional Buddhism in the region of greater Bengal were the Buddhist monasteries. The evidence for this is not only drawn from archaeological investigations but corroborated through the 7th century accounts left by Xuanzang and Yijing. This would put the history of Buddhist monastic development in the region to early beginnings in historic times. The remains of the Buddhist monasteries indicate that irrespective of the political power, patronage and personal faith of the rulers, there was a continuous growth of the Buddhist vihāras, stūpas and temples from 2nd century BCE onwards. There were however, several distinctive phases of the development of the Buddhist religious monuments with their specific architectural characteristics. A direct connection between the Buddhist religious edifices and Buddhist tantra is rather difficult to determine. Nevertheless, certain architectural features of the regional Buddhist monuments as well as the excavated antiquities, provide us with some clues which indicate the possible manifestation of Buddhist tantra within the broader ambit of the vihāras. Simultaneously, looking beyond the archaeological data of the Buddhist vihāras, focusing on the resident monks and tracing the associated scholarly works retrieved from the connected orbit of Buddhism in the broader Asian network may also help us to understand the connections with Buddhist tantra. The present chapter proposes to review the archaeological remains, epigraphic evidence and Tibetan as well as Chinese accounts to draw clues for the prevalence of Tantric orientations in Buddhism in the select context.

2.1 Mapping the development of the Buddhist monastic complexes in early medieval Bengal

Archaeological landscape of Buddhism in Bengal has gone through dynamic processes of change. While the early historic evidence is understood partly from archaeological sites, the account of Faxian helps us in mapping the Buddhist vihāras and monastic culture in the early historic phase. The account of Xuanzang, coming from the 7th century CE, however, provides the full picture of efflorescence, through his mid-way eye-witness account of the scene of Buddhist institutional presence in eastern India, especially in southern Bihar, Jharkhand, Bengal and Odisha. So far as the literary evidence is concerned therefore, this account forms the cornerstone for

grasping the basic layout of the Buddhist landscape in our context. Along with this, Yijing's account provides details of the life within monastic order, which is partly reviewed to observe relevant clues. The available archaeological reports and field observation provide the hard evidence for us to relate to the entire scene of Buddhist monastic presence and practices in the region. Taken together the evidence indicates multiple phases of development of Buddhist institutions in different zones, sub-regions etc.

2.1.1 Puṇḍravardhana – Varendra region

The earliest phase of the construction of Buddhist viḥāras, stūpas and temples could be attributed to the later and post-Gupta period from 5th – 6th centuries onwards. This period marked an extraordinary proliferation in the Buddhist institutional architecture which was widely distributed among the different sub-regions of Bengal including the Varendra, Samatāṭa, Vaṅga and Harikela. The excavation of the Franco-Bangladeshi team at the eastern rampart and Mazar area of the Mahasthangarh unearthed some of the city's most ancient brick structure that goes back to 2nd century BCE to 1st century CE. In the eastern rampart area, a brick structure was unearthed, datable to 3rd – 6th centuries CE. This has been identified as a base of a stūpa.¹ The adjacent area of Mahasthangarh is also very rich in terms of the production of Buddhist sculptures as early as 5th century CE. Among the Buddhist antiquities recovered from around Mahasthangarh, we can mention a standing sandstone Buddha found from the nearby Vashu Viḥāra, a bronze Mañjuśrī from Saralpur and a double-sided Buddha from Namuja. All of these can be stylistically dated to the Gupta period. Sandrine Gill has shown that the sandstone Buddha images of Namuja and Biharail showing striking affinity with Sarnath art like belted drapery style, wide shoulder and thin waist, were imported to Bengal.² The Bara Tangra area of Namuja, find place of the sandstone Buddha, has three mounds with the possibility of the existence of the remains of Buddhist viḥāra. The re-carved Buddha of Namuja shows artistic similarities with the Sandstone Buddha in

¹ Jean Francois Salles, "Mahasthan", in Abdul M Chowdhury and Ranabir Chakravarti (eds), *History of Bangladesh: Early Bengal in Regional Perspectives*, Vol. I, Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 2018, p. 225.

² Sandrine Grill, "Notes on Chronology and Style: Evidence from Mahasthan", in Gautam Sengupta and Sheena Panja (eds), *Archaeology of Eastern India: New Perspectives*, Kolkata: Centre for Archaeological Studies and Training, Eastern India, 2002, p. 42.

varadāmudrā from Bhasu Vihāra and this due might to be the fact that carving of the two images by the same artistic school in Puṇḍravardhana.

The most remarkable archaeological remains of the two Buddhist Vihāras and a temple in the vicinity of Mahasthangarh are Bhasu Vihāra, Bihar Dhap/Totaram Panditer Bhita and Gokul Medh. When Xuanzang visited ancient Puṇḍravardhana in 7th century he saw twenty Buddhist monasteries with 3000 bhikṣus practicing the teaching of little and great vehicle. According to the account of the Chinese pilgrim, about 4 miles west of the city of Puṇḍranagara, there was a monastery with spacious hall and tall storied chamber known as Po-si-po. He also mentioned the existence of a temple adjacent to this monastery which had an image of Avalokiteśvara. Cunningham identified this monastery with the ruins of Bhasuvihāra, five Kilometres west of Mahasthangarh. The vihāra yielded a number of seals carrying legends which has been read by B.N. Mukherjee as Basavapura.³ About forty bronze images of various Buddhist divinities like Akṣobhya, Avalokiteśvara, Mañjuśrī, Prajñāpāramitā and Śyāmā Tārā and ninety inscribed terracotta clay sealing have been discovered from Bhasu Vihāra. The excavation at the Bhasu Vihāra area has brought to light the two Buddhist monasteries and a small semi-cruciform shrine.



Temple at Bhasu Vihāra, Bogra, Photo: present researcher



Courtyard of Bhasu Vihāra, Bogra, Photo: present researcher

The excavated ruins of Bihar dhap, also locally known as Totaram Panditer Bhita is situated six Kilometres north-west of Mahasthangarh. The early trace of human habitation in the monastery can be dated back to late 6th to early 7th century CE. The site is surrounded on three sides by river

³ Sarita Khetry, “Buddhism”, p. 300

Nagar, a brunch of river Karatoya. The extensive excavation of the site from 1979-1986 unveiled a large monastery situated in the western side of the mound.⁴ The monastery contains 37 monastic cells in its four wings with an entrance hall in the east. It underwent two phases of building constructions. Apart from the architectural remains the site also produced about five hundred antiquities including one bronze image of dhyānī Buddha, a few terracotta plaques and figurines, ornamented bricks and some earthen ware.



Monastic Cells of Bihar Dhap, Photo: present researcher



Gokul Medh, Bogra, Photo: present researcher

Situated about 1.5 kilometers south of the fortified Mahasthangarh is a tall circular structure, locally known as the nuptial bedroom of Behula and Lakshinder of the popular folklore of medieval Bengal. This structure, better known as Gokul Medh was excavated by the Archaeological Survey of India during 1934-36. The excavation laid bare a gigantic temple, which was probably taller in its original form. The building was originally a Buddhist stūpa or shrine which was later turned into a śaiva temple during the Sena rule. The terracotta plaques and associated objects discovered from here indicate that the edifice was built in sixth to seventh centuries CE. Innumerable mounds around the fortified area of Mahasthangarh have been identified by the archaeologists. A few of these culturally heterogeneous mounds like Godaibari dhap, Kanai dhap, Mangolkot have unearthed Buddhist antiquities and structures of religious architecture from early and late Gupta period. The archaeological remains of vihāra, however is absent in any of these mounds.

⁴ For details of the excavation see Md. Shafiqul Alam et al., *Excavation at Bihar Dhap, Bogra 1979-1986*, Dhaka: Department of Archaeology, Govt. of the Peoples Republic of Bangladesh, 2000

The possible existence of the Buddhist religious buildings and antiquities during Gupta period has been reported from a number of places in Varendra regions including Biharail, Rajshahi and Panchgarh district of Northern Bangladesh. K.N. Dikshit visited the site in Rajshahi in 1922-23 and conducted experimental excavation in the Rajbari Mound of Biharail and hinted the possible existence of a vihāra of 4th century.⁵ Similar possibility of the existence of a Buddhist stūpa has also been reported from Bhitargarh, a site located 16 Kilometres northeast of Panchgarh town. The site, situated on the channel of River Karatoya was an important nodal point between Bengal and Tibet. Inside the burnt brick ramparts of the city two innermost mounds revealed one cruciform temple and a stūpa of seventh century CE.⁶ The Varendra region had another early Gupta period monastery called Mṛgasthāpana. When Chinese pilgrim Yijing visited Varendra region he mentioned that about forty *yojanas* to the east of Nālandā there was a sanctuary called Mi-li-kia-si-kia-po-no and a Chinese temple close to it.⁷ Yijing's account tells us that Gupta king Śrīgupta built this temple on the bank of the Ganges and donated 24 villages for the maintenance of the temple. The name of the Mṛgasthāpana stūpa of Varendra, first comes to our notice by the label of a painting in an illustrated manuscript dated 1015 CE at the Cambridge University Library. Scholars have identified the Mi-li-kia-si-kia-po-no of Yijing with Mṛgasthāpana Vihāra of the manuscript, though no physical evidence of the vihāra has been excavated or identified so far.

The largest Buddhist mahāvihāra in the Puṇḍravardhana sub-region is Sompura/Paharpur, situated in the Badalgachi upazila of Naogaon district, Bangladesh. The Pāla king Dharmapāla is credited with the construction of this mahāvihāra in the late 8th century since a terracotta sealing bearing his name was found from the debris. The Buddhist structure of Paharpur however was constructed upon another brick structure, the character of which cannot be precisely determined in light of the absence of evidence.⁸ The site was earlier known as Paharpur Mound which was systematically excavated since 1919 till 1932 under the supervision of R.D. Banerji and K.N.

⁵ Ataur Rahman, "Recent Discovered Archaeological Buddhist Sites in Bangladesh", in Sanjay Garg (ed), *Archaeology of Buddhism: Recent Discoveries in South Asia*, Delhi: Manohar, 2017, p. 30

⁶ Birendra Nath Prasad, *Archaeology of Religion in South Asia: Buddhist, Brahmanical and Jain Religious Centres in Bihar and Bengal*, New York: Routledge, 2021, p. 153

⁷ J. Takakusu (tr and ed), *A Record of the Buddhist Religion as Practiced in India and Malay Archipelago (AD 671-695)*, Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1966, p. xxx.

⁸ Swadhin Sen and Md. Shafuqul Alam, "Paharpur", in Abdul M Chowdhury and Ranabir Chakravarti (eds), *History of Bangladesh: Early Bengal in Regional Perspectives*, Vol. I, Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 2018, p. 364

Dikshit. The excavated remains of the Paharpur mahāvihāra is comprised of 177 cells arranged in the four arms of the quadrangle structure. The central shrine was built on a cruciform plan with a massive square block in the centre containing the deep shrine chamber. Broad projection containing pillared hall were added to each arm of the central block making it a cruciform shrine. The four-armed projections were surrounded by a circumambulatory passage.



Central Temple, Paharpur, Photo: present researcher



Cluster of stūpas, Satyapirer Bhita, Photo: present researcher

To a few metres west of the Paharpur vihāra, there is a complex of Buddhist temple and 132 votive stūpas, known as Satyapirer Bhita where a stone image of Tārā has been recovered.⁹

From the Naogaon district of Bangladesh, another remain of a Buddhist structure was found at the village Halud Vihar of Badalgachi Upazilla. The entire village was profusely littered with ancient potsherds and brick-bats often revealing brick walls in different parts. The excavation at a high mound during 1993 exposed the remains of a temple complex consisting of a solid structure, two rectangular rooms, a platform, a staircase and parts of the enclosure walls.¹⁰ A solid structure showing the characteristics of a stūpa has been exposed in the western side of the mound. The two rectangular rooms in front of the solid structure were probably used for icon worship and assembly hall. The temple was a single standing rectangular edifice without any trace of associative saṅgha.

⁹ K.N. Dikshit, *Excavation at Paharpur, Bengal: Memoir of Archaeological Survey of India*, No. 55, Delhi: ASI, 1938, p. 84.

¹⁰ Md. Abul Hashem Miah et al., *A Preliminary Report on the Excavation at Halud Vihara*, Naogaon, Dhaka: Department of Archaeology, Bangladesh, 2000, p. 2-4

Another Pāla period vihāra, built by Vajradeva with the sanction of Mahendrapāla in the middle of 9th century is Nandadīrghī Vihāra, situated on the bank of River Punarbhaba in the Jagjivanpur village of Malda district of West Bengal state. Excavation between 1993 and 2005, after a chance discovery of a copperplate inscription by a local farmer has laid bare a brick-built monastery with two distinct phases of reconstructions.¹¹ The architecture of the monastery, similar to that of the Vikramśīla, is comprised of a 32 number of cells, a staircase, a courtyard made of rammed bricks, a sanctum complex, an ambulatory passage and four circular bastions. The antiquities recovered from the ruins include sealings with dharmacakra and deer motifs



Halud Vihar, Naogaon, Photo: present researcher



Courtyard, Nandadirghi Vihar, Photo: present researcher

bearing the name of the monastery and monks, bronze image of Marīcī, Buddha in bhumisparśa mudrā and 250 terracotta plaques depicting deities of Brahmanical and Buddhist pantheon, daily lives of people and animals. The site has also several other rich archaeological mounds like Akhridanga, Mayer Bhita etc. which yielded antiquities like sealing, potsherds and terracotta object. The vihāra was named after a water body called Nandadīrghī which still stands nearby by the name of Nander beal. The builder of the monastery, Vajradeva was also referred to in some of the sealings with the prefix ‘Nanda-śri Vajra’.¹² The discovery of a copperplate inscription from the Tulabhita mound has helped us to contextualize the excavated ruins in the land grant process and the nature and functionalities of the monastic community lived here.

¹¹ Sheena Panja, “Jagajjivanpur and Bangarh”, in Abdul M Chowdhury and Ranabir Chakravarti (eds), *History of Bangladesh: Early Bengal in Regional Perspectives*, Vol. I, Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 2018, p. 218

¹² Gautam Sengupta, “Nandadīrghīvihāra: An Overview”, in *Prāgdhārā*, No. 19, 2008-09, p. 51

Among the late Pāla period vihāra greatly celebrated in the Tibetan account was Jagaddala mahāvihāra, built by the Pāla sovereign Rāmapāla in late 11th century. The mahāvihāra has been arguably identified with the archaeological ruins of a square brick structure on the west bank of Kotra River in the Jagaddala village of Dhamuirhat upazilla of Naogaon district, Bangladesh. It has been argued, by referring to Sandhyākarnandī’s *Rāmacarita*, that the capital city Rāmavati built by Rāmapāla was situated nearby, probably in the village of Jagatnagar.¹³ The main entrance of the vihāra was situated in the middle of the eastern wing. The main temple was situated in the middle of the western wing by a small projection to the western side. The temple is east facing with a square sanctum and a circumambulatory passage. A giant stone image of Avalokiteśvara, presumably the central deity of the main temple was found during 1996-97 excavation.¹⁴ A large maṇḍapa or pillared hall was there in front of the main temple corroborated by the discovery of four large sized granite pillars.



Circular bastion, Jagaddala, Photo: present researcher



Temple, Jagaddala Mahāvihāra, Photo: present researcher

Remains of another Buddhist vihāra belonging to 7th- 8th centuries CE was found from the village Marash of Nawabgunj Upazilla of Dinajpur district, Bangladesh. The vihāra, known as

¹³ Mahbub ul-Alam, “Jadaddala”, in Abdul M Chowdhury and Ranabir Chakravarti (eds), *History of Bangladesh: Early Bengal in Regional Perspectives*, Vol. I, Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 2018, p. 199

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 201

Sitakot vihāra is square shaped and had 41 monastic cells connected by a wide veranda and doorway.¹⁵

Sporadic evidence of Buddhist vihāras and stūpas showing characteristic feature of 10th – 12th centuries have been unearthed from extensive regions of north-western Bangladesh. At least three remains of Buddhist vihāra in a cluster have been excavated in Domile of Nawabganj Upazilla of Dinajpur district. The monastic settlement of Domile, indicated by Swadhin Sen, was spatially associated with Khairaguni where smaller mounds with temple, shrine and stūpas are located.¹⁶ Evidence of a stūpa shrine has also been found in the Bowalar Mandab Mound in the Birampur Upazilla on the bank of an abandoned channel of Asuli Nalshisha Rivers. Here, a Buddhist stūpa-shrine was built upon a raised platform with a cellular architectural style.¹⁷ The exploratory excavation at the Chor Chakrabartir Dhap also shows the evidence of a Buddhist monastery. Remains of a Buddhist temple and śārīrika stūpa has been unearthed by the recent archaeological excavation at the Itakura Dhibi at Basudevpur village of Bochaganj Upazilla of Dinajpur district. It has been indicated that the site was associated with Buddhist tantra and was later converted into Tantric Saivism.¹⁸ Swadhin Sen has argued that the discrete location of the temple at Itakura Dhibi without any associative sangha might hint at the penetration of the tantric Buddhist tradition among the laity. Similar śārīrika stūpas have also been discovered from Bheloya of the Kaharol Upazilla of the Dinajpur district. This site shows simultaneous evidence of Buddhist, Jain and Brahmanical traditions.

2.1.2 Vaṅga

Evidence of Buddhist architecture in the form of stūpa and vihāra in the Vaṅga region lying north of the river Padma can be dated as early as 6th – 7th centuries CE. Foremost among the Buddhist remains of Vaṅga was Sabhar where a number of archaeological sites with Buddhist antiquities were found. The geological feature of the region shows that in ancient time it was a

¹⁵ Mohammad Abu al Hasan, “Ancient Sites and Settlements”, in Bulbul Ahmed (ed), *Buddhist Heritage of Bangladesh*, p. 69

¹⁶ Swadhin Sen, “Northwestern Bangladesh: Sites and Settlements”, in Abdul M Chowdhury and Ranabir Chakravarti (eds), *History of Bangladesh: Early Bengal in Regional Perspectives*, Vol. I, Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 2018, p. 326

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 327

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 334

confluence of Bangshi, Turag and Dhaleswari rivers. The region has a vibrant archaeological profile with gold coins, bronze sculptures, religious buildings, mud-fort, terracotta plaques etc. Excavation at Raja Harishchandra Badi mound of Sabhar laid bare a square shaped solid brick stūpa with circumambulatory passage and a monastery with 28 cells in the southern side of the stūpa.¹⁹ Archaeologists have noticed that the earliest phase of construction can be dated in 7th century CE. The cruciform style stūpa was a typical architectural style of Bengal in 7th – 8th centuries CE shared by another small cruciform stūpa in the vicinity known as Dagar Mura. The mound also yielded twenty-three bronze images, one stone image and one terracotta image representing Buddhist deities like Jambhala, Amoghasiddhi, Ratnasambhava, Akṣobhya, Amitābha, Padmapāṇi, Prajñāpāramitā and Tārā with Vajrayāna feature.²⁰ Based on Palaeography, the images have been dated between the 9th – 10th centuries CE.



Vihāra of Raja Harishchandra Badi, Photo: present researcher



Square Stūpa, Sabhar, Photo: present researcher

In the upper Vaṅga sub-region a comparatively late development of Buddhist buildings might be observed in the Vikrampur area. It constituted one of the richest Buddhist heritages as more than fifty per cent of the Buddhist sculptures of the Bangladesh National Museum belonged to this region. Excavation around the Nateshwar area has laid bare extensive ruins of Buddhist architecture with stūpa and shrine. Based on the radiocarbon dating the Nateshwar sites have been

¹⁹ Md. Mozammel Haque, “Sabhar”, in Abdul M Chowdhury and Ranabir Chakravarti (eds), *History of Bangladesh: Early Bengal in Regional Perspectives*, Vol. I, Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 2018, pp. 388-397

²⁰ Md. Mozammel Haque, “Sabhar,” p. 395

dated between 780-1223 CE with three distinctive periods of development.²¹ The archaeologists have indicated that the huge central monument probably housed central maṇḍala deity Vairocana and the depth of its foundation was deeper than the pillared halls.²² Along with the Nateshwar complex, there was another Buddhist site in Vikrampur known as Raghurampur where the remains of a Buddhist monastery and a stūpa complex were found. This vihāra has been identified with Vikrampuri vihāra as mentioned in the Chinese source.²³ Archaeologists have indicated that this is only partial exposing of the vihāra which can be actually of a much larger size – about thousand square metres. The radio carbon dating has placed the vihāra between 990 – 1050 CE, contemporary to the life time of Atīśa Dipaṃkara Śrījñāna who was born here.

Recent excavation at Bharat Bhayna in the south-western Bangladesh has unearthed a cruciform Buddhist temple of seventh century. The area was first visited by K.N. Dikshit in the first quarter of 20th century. He anticipated after preliminary survey that it was a stūpa mound which dates back to the Gupta period between 3rd – 5th centuries CE.²⁴ However the recent excavation proposes a much later date with three distinctive periods of construction.²⁵ A square high brick-built platform was found on the top of the structure. This structure led the archaeologist to anticipate that there was probably a superstructure on this platform like that of Gokul Medh and the stūpa shrine at Sandalpur, Dinajpur.²⁶ According to the constructional style of the building, it can be attributed to 7th century CE. The stand-alone cruciform temple without any monastic complex poses a curious characteristic of Buddhism with the possibility of catering to the religious need of the laity. Temple without a vihāra might significantly indicate Buddhism's autonomous operation in the rural area without a custodian sangha.

Further evidence of Buddhist establishments in the south-western coastal region of Bangladesh can be found in Jhurijhara mound of Satkhira district and Damdam Pirsthan Dhibi of

²¹ Sufi Mostafizur Rahman et. al., “Vikrampur”, Abdul M Chowdhury and Ranabir Chakravarti (eds), *History of Bangladesh: Early Bengal in Regional Perspectives*, Vol. I, Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 2018, p. 443

²² Ibid, p. 454

²³ Ibid, p. 442

²⁴ K.N. Dikshit, *Bharat Bhayna*, Annual Report of the Archaeological Survey of India, 1921-22, 1924

²⁵ Afroza Khan Mita and AKM Syfur Rahman, “Rethinking the Archaeological Remains of Bharat Bhayna”, in Abdul M Chowdhury and Ranabir Chakravarti (eds), *History of Bangladesh: Early Bengal in Regional Perspectives*, Vol. I, Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 2018, p. 417

²⁶ Ibid, p. 418

Jessore district of Bangladesh. Jhurijhara mound is situated in the floodplains of Kapotakkha-Bhairav River system. About four periods of rebuilding, starting from 7th century CE, have been identified by the archaeologist in the early medieval phase.²⁷ Based on the structure of the building archaeologist has identified the edifice as a stūpa built in the initial period.²⁸ In later period it was enlarged and was probably turned into a stūpa temple. The architectural similarity with the several Buddhist establishments of north-western Bangladesh like Bharat-Bhayna and Damdam Pirsthan Dhibi of Jessore district has led archaeologist to designate this structure as a Buddhist one.

Lower Gangetic Delta subregion

Buddhist antiquities and possible Buddhist architecture in the coastal region of south-west Bengal have been found from a few more places like Kankandighi of South 24 Parganas, West Bengal, India. The earliest traces of Buddhist architecture in this site belonged to the period between the 6th – 7th centuries CE. Excavation at the Pilkhana mound of Kankandighi unearthed a brick structure with several phases of reconstructions.²⁹ Whether this structure was the remains of a Buddhist vihāra has not been confirmed yet. However, the excavation yielded Buddhist antiquities like a terracotta Jambhala sculpture and terracotta plaque with the motif of seated Buddha. Based on the pottery and sculptural style the site has been dated between 7th – 12th centuries CE.

2.1.3 Rāḍha

The earliest Buddhist antiquity was discovered from Tamluk in the present-day state of West Bengal, identified with ancient Tāmralipti, where a miniature stūpa made of bones was found, datable to as early as 2nd century CE. The votive stūpa bears an inscription of kharoṣṭhī-Brāhmī at its base which, on the basis of Palaeographic feature, has been dated to second century BCE by B.N. Mukherjee. He also gives the reading of the inscription as ‘chetagotha’ meaning a meeting place for the intelligent beings or the meeting place for the devotees of the Caitya. The

²⁷ AKM Syfur Rahman et. al., *Jhurijhara Dhibi: Pratnatattvik Khananer Prathamik Pratibedan* (in Bengali), Khulna: Department of Archaeology, Ministry of Cultural Affairs, Peoples’ Republic of Bangladesh, 2020, p. 16

²⁸ *Ibid*, p. 29

²⁹ Durga Basu, “Early Medieval Material Culture of Coastal Bengal with Special Reference to the Site of Kankandighi”, in Tilottama Mukherjee and Nupur Dasgupta (eds), *Religion, Landscape and Material Culture in Pre-modern South Asia*, London and New York: Routledge, 2023, pp. 242-269

etymology of the word Caitya derives from Ceta or sect and the inscription might refer to the meeting place of the followers of a Buddhist sect. Sarita Khetry has shown that it is the earliest epigraphic reference to Caityaka sect in Tāmralipti.³⁰ One cannot completely rule out the possibility of the miniature stūpa being transported from outside of Tamluk as the place was a flourishing port where varied groups of sailors, merchants and missionaries halted. Its Buddhist connection was mainly linked to the city's position in a major maritime route where merchants and religious missionaries gathered for sea voyages.³¹

The northern Rāḍha sub-region lying south of the river Ganga/Bhagirathi shows the evidence of Buddhist religious buildings in a few places of Birbhum and Murshidabad districts of West Bengal. The arid lateritic land tract of Birbhum yielded some curious ruins of brick structures which have been anticipated by the archaeologists as the remains of a Buddhist monastery. Ruins of Beluti, 15 Kilometres northeast of Bolpur might be the remnants of a Gupta period Buddhist monastery as hinted by the archaeologists.³² Inadequate excavation and plundering of the site have made it difficult to understand what kind of Buddhism was practiced here.

However, the most significant discovery in the northern Rāḍha region is Raktamṛtikā mahāvihāra which has been identified with the excavated ruins of Chiruti village of Murshidabad district in West Bengal, India. Situated in the close proximity of the mahāvihāra are the ruins of the ancient city of Karṇasuvarṇa. Excavation at seventeen mounds like Rajbadidanga, Nilkuthidanga, Raksashidanga, Dheka, Ugura, Hatpara, Amarkundu, Kiriteswari, Gokarna etc. resulted in the exposure of a Buddhist monastery, Buddhist antiquities as well as structural habitation remains of an urban setting. The mound Rajbadidanga, find spot of the Buddhist monastery, is situated on the western bank of River Bhagirathi on the Barind upland beside a lake called Nwababer beal. Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang referred to this mahāvihāra as Lo-to-wei-chi (Raktaviti) situated in the vicinity of the capital Kie-lo-na-su-fa-la-na (Karṇasuvarṇa). We find the

³⁰Sarita Khetry, "Buddhism", in Abdul M. Chowdhury and Ranabir Chakravarti (eds), *History of Bangladesh: Early Bengal in Regional Perspectives*, Vol. I, Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 2018, p. 298

³¹Faxian landed in Tamluk during his journey to India. For details, see Li Ronxi, "The Journey of the Eminent Monk Faxian," *Lives of Great Monks and Nuns*, Barkley: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, 2002, pp. 157-163.

³²B.N. Prasad, *Archaeology of Religion in South Asia: Buddhist, Brahmanical and Jain Religious Centres in Bihar and Bengal*, New York: Routledge, 2021, p. 145

mention of Karṇasuvārṇa in a number of copperplate inscriptions like Vappaghosavata Grant of Jayanāga and Nidhanpur copperplate of Bhāṣkarvarman.³³ Excavation at Rajbadidanga mound under the supervision of S.R Das laid bare the ruins of a Buddhist monastery. He identified three cultural periods from 2nd century CE to 13th century CE with five distinctive phases of structural reconstructions, mainly based on the findings of terracotta seals.³⁴ The massive edifice of the monastic building appeared in the third phase with a staircase flanked by two stūpa basements between 6th – 8th centuries CE.³⁵ Remains of terracotta figurines, iron objects, semi-precious stones and beads along with Brahmanical and Buddhist broken sculpture were found from the excavation at Nilkuthidanga and Rakshashidanga mound.³⁶ A grand stone sculpture of Khasarpaṇa Avalokiteśvara from a nearby village called Amarkundu might be referred to in this regard to highlight the Buddhist culture of the area.

The Buddhist vihāra at Moghalmari demonstrates that the southern portion of Rāḍha sub-region along the coastal Bengal shows the traces of Buddhism in as early as 6th century CE. The excavation at Moghalmari exposed a Buddhist monastic structure in the Sakhisonar mound.³⁷ The site probably belonged to Dandabhukti, a provincial unit of early medieval Bengal. Excavation of different phases has revealed that the monastic complex underwent at least two structural rebuilding phases.³⁸ Among the Buddhist antiquities of Moghalmari, most remarkable are the stucco figure of Jambhala/Kubera seated in pratyāliḍha attitude, clay tablets bearing Buddhist creed and the figures of Buddha and stūpa. The comparative study of the Moghalmari clay tablets and similar tablets from western Deccan and parts of Southeast Asia has led scholars to argue that

³³ Somreeta Majumder, “Locating the Monastery in Landscape Context: A Preliminary Study of the Raktamrittika Mahavihara of Karnasuvārṇa”, in *Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies in Archaeology*, 7 (2009), p. 627

³⁴ S.R. Das, *Rajbadidanga: 1962 (Chiruti: Jadupur) An Interim Report on Excavations at Rajbadidanga and Terracotta Seals and Sealings*. Kolkata: The Asiatic Society, 1962, p. 42

³⁵ *Ibid*, pp. 23-43

³⁶ B.K. Bandyopadhyay, “Excavation at Nilkuthi Mound, Mouja Chak Chandpara, district Murshidabad, West Bengal (2005-06)”, in *Journal of Bengal Art*, Vol. 11-12, pp. 155-169

³⁷ Bhaskar Das et. al., “A Study on the Ruins of the Buddhist Monasteries in West Bengal in the Context of Buddhist Tourism Development,” in *Indian Journal of Geography and Environment*, Vol. 19, 2022, p. 56.

³⁸ Rajat Sanyal, “Moghalmari”, in Abdul M Chowdhury and Ranabir Chakravarti (eds), *History of Bangladesh: Early Bengal in Regional Perspectives*, Vol. I, Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 2018, p, 285

besides being an esoteric monastic complex, it also was a part of the larger Buddhist network of south and south-east Asia.³⁹

Recent excavation in the Bharatpur village on the bank of Damodar in the Bardhaman district, West Bengal has revealed a stūpa and a Buddhist monastery. The site also yielded Black and Red Ware from the Chalcolithic period, showing evidence of a continuous human settlement for a fairly long period.⁴⁰ The structure of the stūpa consists of a hemispherical dome on a base and a relic chamber in the middle. There was a circumambulatory passage around the pañcaratha brick structure much similar to the stūpa of Dagar Mura at Savar. The shape is identical to the cruciform structure with projection at the four side. The remains of a Buddhist monastery with monastic cells have been discovered near the stūpa. The monastery was built in three phases between the 7th – 9th centuries CE.⁴¹ Bharatpur is closely situated near Mallasarul area which yielded the copperplate of Vijayasena (6th century CE) the information from which indicates a thriving rural society in the vicinity which may be connected to the orbit of the monastic order. A few other significant finds in the vicinity in villages like Bera revealed traces indicating the prevalence of Buddhism in the subregion. An image of the Buddhist deity Māricī found from this village is especially significant for our present research. It sets the expanse of possible tantric orientation within Buddhism from Jagajjivanpur in Varendra to the Rāḍha subregion.

2.1.4 Samataṭa and Harikela

Extensive ruins of Buddhist vihāra, mahāvihāra, stūpa, temple and chaitya datable to 6th - 13th century CE may be found in the Mainamati area of Comilla, the probable ancient capital of Samataṭa Kingdom. The sub-region was visited by Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang in 7th century who saw 30 Buddhist monasteries and 3000 monks in San-mo-ta-ta or Samataṭa. He informed that the size of the capital of Samataṭa is about 20 li or ten Kilometres. Chinese traveller Sheng Chi who visited the capital of Samataṭa during the reign of Khaḍga king Rājabhaṭa (700-715 CE) saw the king taking out a procession with an image of Avalokiteśvara in the front.

³⁹ Ibid, p. 288.

⁴⁰ Rupam Bhowmik, “Unearthing Bharatpur Stupa: A treasure trove of historical and Cultural artefacts”, <https://www.getbengal.com/details/unearthing-bharatpur-stupa-a-treasure-trove-of-historical-and-cultural-artifacts>, accessed on 25th August, 2024.

⁴¹ Somreeta Majumder, “Archaeological Landscape of the Buddhist Stupa of Bharatpur”, *Arnava*, Vol. 9, No. 3, 2020, pp. 46-47.

The oldest site of Mainamati was identified with the excavated ruins of Rupban Mura since a sandstone Buddha showing Gupta period Sarnath style was discovered from the eastern chamber of the cruciform temple.⁴² Rupban Mura is located at an approximately middle position of the Lalmai-Mainamati range. The excavation revealed the structural remains of Buddhist establishments including a four-faced cruciform temple and a monastery located to the south-east of the temple. The temple was built over three distinctive rebuilding phases which can be dated between 7th and 12th century CE. The temple was built on a cruciform plan with four image chambers facing the four cardinal directions.⁴³ In the initial period it was a square shaped temple like that of the Itakhola Mura. The arms of the cross along with the walls of the image chambers were enlarged during the consecutive reconstruction periods giving it a cruciform shape. The temple was surrounded by a small portion of ambulatory passage.⁴⁴



Cruciform shrine of Rupban Mura, Mainamati. Sandstone Buddha (6th century) (right) found during excavation, Photo: present researcher

A few bronze pieces, probably fragments of the bronze sculptures were found on the pedestal of northern and southern chambers leading the archaeologists to assume that these chambers housed the bronze made Buddhist images. The main entrance in the middle of the eastern exterior wall

⁴² Mokammal H Bhuiyan, “Mainamati”, p. 267

⁴³ Dr. Md. Shafiqul Alam et al., *Excavation at Rupban Mura, Mainamati, Comilla*, Dhaka: Department of Archaeology, Ministry of Cultural Affairs, People’s Republic of Bangladesh, 2000, p. 8

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, p. 9.

was flanked by an octagonal stūpa and a square stūpa. The monastery of Rupban Mura complex is located a few metres south-east of the temple revealing three rebuilding phases corresponding to the temple.

The simultaneous, yet separate existence of the temple and monastery in a complex is a typical feature of Mainamati also shared by Itakhola Mura. Among the Buddhist antiquities found from the Rupban Mura, mention might be made of the colossal sandstone Buddha and Bronze image of Amitābha and Sitātapatrā.⁴⁵ The debased gold coins of Khaḍga king Balabhaṭa and the Buddha image help to date the temple and monastic complex of Rupban Mura to the 7th century CE.



Sanctum, Itakhola Mura, Photo: present researcher



Entrance of Itakhola Temple, Photo: present researcher

Similar example of the temple and monastic complex separate from each other might be found in Itakhola Mura situated very close to Rupban Mura. The excavation at Itakhola Mura between 1986 and 1992 unearthed a Buddhist temple housing a huge stucco image of Akṣobhya *in situ* in a blind cell so far unknown in eastern India.⁴⁶ A small cruciform shrine was erected on the western side of the temple. The temple of Itakhola Mura is enigmatic in the sense that the solid square structure designated as a stūpa is nowhere known in eastern India. The first foundation of Itakhola was probably laid in the mid-7th century CE by an earlier Khaḍga king than Rājabhāṭa.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Dr. Md. Shafiqul Alam et al., *Excavation at Rupban Mura*, pp. 18-25

⁴⁶ Habibur Rahman, *Excavation Report on Itakhola Mura*, Dhaka: Department of Archaeology, Ministry of Cultural Affairs, People's Republic of Bangladesh, 1997

⁴⁷ Abu Imam, *Excavation at Mainamati: An Exploratory Study*, p. 65

The most celebrated site in the Mainamati area is the Salban Vihāra identified as Śrī Bhavadeva Mahāvihāra by a three-line inscription in a terracotta sealing. A cruciform central shrine surrounded by rows of monastic cells in the four directions has been unearthed from here during the excavation since 1955. It is the second largest monastery in Mainamati with an approach in the north. The four arms of the quadrangle monastery contain a total of 115 rooms for the resident monks arranged surrounding a courtyard and an ambulatory passage. There was a spacious entrance hall flanked by two guard rooms.



**Entrance to the central Shrine, Salban Vihar,
Photo: present researcher**



**Monastic cells and votive stūpa of Salban Vihāra,
Photo: present researcher**

The building of this huge structure can be attributed to the Deva king Bhavadeva in the end of 7th century and beginning of 8th century CE. The antiquities yielded from here include seven copperplate inscriptions, about 350 silver and gold coins of Gupta and Deva rulers, terracotta plaques, seals and sealing, and a large number of Bronze and stone images. The central chamber and each of its chapels probably housed bronze images, the pedestal of which along with damaged parts has been discovered from a western cell.⁴⁸ There are also traces of other subsidiary shrines on the eastern and southern sides of the central shrine. Recent excavation has unearthed a cluster of two shrines and four stūpas outside the vihāra in the northern side. Based on the inscriptions, coins and sealing found from the excavation the construction of the vihāra has been dated between 770-790 CE.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Imam, *Excavation at Mainamati: An Exploratory Study*, p. 32

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, p. 45

A rare architecture of triratna stūpa along with caitya halls was found from the Mainamati area during the excavation in 1956. The site, also known as Kutila Mura yielded a total 12 number of stūpas, all in the shape of circular drums and hemispherical domes.⁵⁰ The three stūpas in a row of north-south alignments might correspond to the Three Jewels of Buddhism – Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha. There were three oblong caitya halls attached to the three principal stūpas to their immediate east. From inside the cells of the middle stūpa, the excavators found hundreds of miniatures votive stūpas, unbaked clay sealings and soft stone plaques depicting the figures of Buddha, Bodhisattva and Buddhist goddesses. Based on the Palaeography of the Buddhist creed inscription engraved in the two stone plaques bearing images of Avalokiteśvara and Buddha, Abu Imam has dated them to 7th century CE.⁵¹

Remarkable ruins of Buddhist vihāras with central cruciform shrines have been unearthed from other mounds of Mainamati like Ānanda vihāra and Bhoj vihāra. The largest archaeological site of Lalmai-Mainamati region is Ānanda vihāra also locally known as Ānanda Rajar Prasad. From the western arm a stone image of Avalokiteśvara, similar to that of the Kutila Mura, was recovered in an extremely fragile condition during 1979-82 excavation.⁵² The entrance was at the centre of the northern wing. The vihāra was probably built by Deva king Ānandadeva and was finished by his son Bhavadeva during the late 7th century. In the vicinity of the Ānanda Vihāra there is another vihāra with a cruciform central shrine known as Bhoja Vihāra. The most remarkable findings of Bhoja Vihāra are the gigantic bronze image of Vajrasattva found from the northern chamber of the shrine and two medium sized soft grey stone plaques depicting Akṣobhya and Amitābha.

Remains of Buddhist architecture has also been unearthed from the Ranir Bunglaow mound situated in the northern most point of the Lalmai-Mainamati range. The site was earlier thought to be the remains of a secular structure, but later excavation has revealed a different architectural character of a Buddhist shrine showing cruciform structure.⁵³ The other sites of Mainamati including Rupban Kanya Mura, Bairagir Mura, Kotbari Mound, Rupbani Mura, Balagazir Mura,

⁵⁰ Imam, *Excavation at Mainamati*, p. 48

⁵¹ *Ibid*, p. 53

⁵² Md. Shafiqul Alam and Md. Abul Hashem Miah, *Excavations at Ananda Vihara, Mainamati, Comilla, 1979-82*, Dhaka: Department of Archaeology, Bangladesh, 1999, p. 11

⁵³ Mohammad Abu al Hasan, “Ancient Sites and Settlements”, p. 99

Ghila Mura, Chandi Mura and Army Bungalow Monastery are archaeologically rich with deposit of antiquities and remains of structures. These sites are either damaged heavily or awaiting to be exposed fully. The interesting findings from the Rupban Kanya Mura are a huge bronze bell weighing 370 Kilograms and a fragmentary stone inscription of eight lines in Gauḍiya script of 10th century probably depicting the portion of a Buddhist text.⁵⁴

The present-day Indian state of Tripura, adjacent to Comilla district, constituting parts of Samatata sub-region, also yielded a number of Buddhist antiquities and remains of a Buddhist vihara. The region was well-connected to Devaparvata, the capital of Samatata, through the river network of River Khirnai. Pilak is one of the important sites in Tripura, located one kilometre away from the river Muhuri. Plenty of Samatata and Harikela coins along with debased Gupta imitation gold coins were recovered from Pilak.⁵⁵ It might also be a part of the Kāmarūpa Kingdom as the coins bore the name Pṛthuvula which was the epithet of the grandfather of Bhāṣkarvarman. A brick structure was excavated from Pilak resembling the structure of a Buddhist monastery.⁵⁶ In the absence of any epigraphical evidence, it is almost impossible to determine the patron of this vihāra, with the possibility of traders or local merchants sponsoring the structure. The excavation in the adjacent mound called Shyamsundar Tilla laid bare another Buddhist structure. Among the Buddhist antiquity of Pilak, we may mention a sculpture of the goddess Cundā. Stylistically the antiquity and the structure can be dated between 9th – 11th centuries CE which corresponded to the rule of Chandras and Sāmanta Lokanātha. The area was probably serving as a transit route to Harikela and Arakan.

The 17th century account of Lama Tāranātha mentioned a Buddhist vihara called Paṇḍita Vihāra in the Chittagong area.⁵⁷ The vihāra has been extensively mentioned in other Tibetan accounts too. However no archaeological traces of such vihara have been found so far. The region probably rose as an eminent Buddhist centre around 10th century CE, as neither Xuanzang, nor, Yijing and Sheng Chi visited Harikela. Tāranātha has mentioned that the Buddhist monks of this vihara used to wear a specific kind of quadrangular hat. The vihara has been mentioned to be a

⁵⁴ Abu Imam, *Excavation at Mainamati: An Exploratory Study*, p. 109

⁵⁵ Ratnabali Ray Sengupta, *Art Activities in Tripura: A Study in Iconography, Style and Historical Context*, Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Calcutta, 2018, p. 41.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, p. 42.

⁵⁷ Mokammel H. Bhuiyan, “Chattagramme Bouddhadharma: Bibartaner Darpane (Bengali)”, *Sougata*, Vol. 22, 2019, p. 8

vibrant centre of Buddhist tantra as it was the birthplace of siddha Tilopāda who was also a resident monk of the Paṇḍita vihāra.⁵⁸ His disciple Nāropā also was active in the same vihāra around the 10th – 11th century. The Vajrayāna scholar Prajñābhadrā was also an important resident monk of the vihāra. The area yielded sculptures of the Buddhist deities like Avalokiteśvara, Akṣobhya, Mañjuśrī and Jambhala which can be dated between 11th – 12th centuries on the basis of paleography.

2.1.5 South Bihar

In the western part of the greater ancient Bengal, the landscape shared direct relationship with the different important incidents of the Buddha's life. Large scale Buddhist monastic and temple sites in Nālandā, Vikramśīla, Bodh Gaya and Kurkihar show traces of Buddhist activities from 5th century onwards. Nālandā and Vikramśīla were the foremost centres of learning attracting students and monks from Tibet and south-east Asia.⁵⁹ The Buddhist archaeological ruins of Nālandā are situated in the Bargaon village of Nālandā district of present-day Indian state of Bihar. Faxian records in the 5th century that Nala (Nālandā), the birthplace of Sariputta, was situated a yojana south-west from Rājagriha. The site was first noticed by Alexander Cunningham based on the account of Xuangzang who noticed that several *sanghārāms* were built by Śakarāditya and his successors in Nālandā where ten thousand monks resided. He also mentioned six vihāras and stūpas among the hundreds of relics on the four sides of the main convent.

The site is comprised of several Buddhist temples. The main temple or Temple no. 3 is a lofty structure enlarged by seven successive rebuilding periods. The site is surrounded by votive stūpas. The fifth period of reconstruction, contemporary to the Gupta period, shaped it in a large structure with an image of Buddha placed in a high platform.⁶⁰ The other temples like Temple no. 12, 13 and 14 show several phases of reconstructions with similar raised porch in front of the sanctum. Among the monasteries of Nālandā most important monastery was the Monastery 1 in

⁵⁸ Bhuiyan, "Chattagramme Bouddhadharma", p. 9.

⁵⁹ Chandrani Banerjee Mukherjee, "Nalanda and Vikramshila: Analyzing the Contours of Urbanity in Ancient India", in *Modern Historical Studies*, Vol. 13-14, 2019-20, pp. 22-38.

⁶⁰ Rajat Sanyal, "Nālandā", in Abdul M Chowdhury and Ranabir Chakravarti (eds), *History of Bangladesh: Early Bengal in Regional Perspectives*, Vol. I, Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 2018, p. 300.

the northeast of site 1A with several phases of constructions.⁶¹ The monastery yielded two damaged copperplate inscriptions of the time of Samudragupta and Dharmapāla. The other monasteries of Nālandā show distinct phases of constructions and architectural feature. The monasteries yielded important artefacts like coin of Kumāragupta (Monastery 4), two sets of double ovens (Monastery 6 and 9) and wooden lintels (Monastery 8). Nālandā and its vicinity also produced a large number of stucco images, stone and bronze made Buddhist sculptures like inscribed images of Avalokiteśvara and Mañjuśrī etc.

The recently discovered archaeological site at Telhara near Nālandā has unearthed another Buddhist monastery of the Pāla period.⁶² The evidence of continuous settlement history has been confirmed by the archaeologists from the NBPW (3rd century BCE) to the Pāla period (11th century CE). Xuanzang visited this place in 7th century and said that the Ti-lo-shi-ka monastery was situated 300 li southwest from Pataliputra. He saw three courts with three storied hall, lofty terrace and open passage in the monastery where 1000 Mahāyāna monks resided. Yijing also noted a monastery named Ti-lou-cha in the same place at the end of 7th century. Excavation was conducted in a mound of the modern village of Telhara, recorded by Cunningham as Tillara, in 2009 by the Directorate of Archaeology, Government of Bihar. The excavation revealed 34 m long brick floor lined with monastic cells. The site yielded a number of bronze and stone sculptures of Buddhist and Brahmanical deities, a lot of terracotta clay tablets and sealings bearing inscriptions.

One of the major mahāvihāras of the early medieval Bengal, built by the Pāla king Dharmapāla was the Vikramśīlamahāvihāra or Vikramśīladevavihāra mentioned repeatedly in the account of Lama Tāranātha (1608 CE) as well as in a manuscript of Aṣṭasahasrikā Prajñāpāramitā of the 15th regnal year of Gopāla III in the latter half of the 10th century. Tāranātha's account has credited the making of the Vikramśīla monastery to Dharmapāla whose reign can be dated in the second half of the 8th century. He also gave a vivid description of the chronological evolution of Vikramśīla monastery's institutional organization from the time of Dharmapāla till the time of Rāmapāla and its condition during the Sena rule.⁶³ Systematic excavation from 1960s in the village of Antichak in the Bhagalpur district of the Indian state of Bihar, has unearthed a huge cruciform

⁶¹ Sanyal, "Nālandā", p. 301.

⁶² Sanyal, "Nālandā", p. 308.

⁶³ Lama Chimpa and Aloka Chattopadhyay (tr.), Debiprasad Chattopadhyay (ed), *Tāranātha's History of Buddhism in India*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1990, p. 274

shrine with circumambulatory passage identified as the ruins of Vikramśīla mahāvihāra. The monastic structure surrounding the central shrine is comprised of the entrance, the veranda, the courtyard, the monastic cells, the exit and the central shrine.⁶⁴ The central cruciform shrine at Antichak is a huge brick-built structure showed three constructional phases. There were provisions made for four chambers on the four cardinal directions with a sanctum and a pillared hall. The chambers, with architectural similarity with Paharpur, probably housed images of Buddhist deities. The whole structure was surrounded by two inner and one outer circumambulatory passage. Antichak yielded a lot of Buddhist antiquities like terracotta plaques depicting Buddhist deities in padmasana, Buddhist stone sculpture of Lokeśvara, Mañjuśrī, Maitreya, Tārā and Jambhala showing finest specimen of Pāla sculptural art. The excavated ruins also yielded a wide range of armament celts, dagger, knives, arrowhead, sickle and hammer which probably indicated a steady defence mechanism of the early medieval monastic institutions.⁶⁵

Buddhist edifices, though meagre in number, have been found in Bodh Gaya, considered to be the holiest place of Buddhism. Here the complex of Mahabodhi temple stands on the west bank of River Phalgu. The temple, with a tall sikhara, is situated in the centre of the archaeological complex. To the right of the temple there is a monastic site, while to the left there is an ancient tank named Buddha pokhar. The temple complex also has a large number of votive stūpas. The site yielded a lot of art objects including stone and bronze sculptures, however there is hardly any inscription found from here. The celebrated *vajrāsana* of the Buddha on which he is said to have attained enlightenment under the bodhi tree is situated at the back of the temple. The throne has been dated by Cunningham to the Kushana or early Gupta period. Debala Mitra has noted that on the railing of Bharhut an inscription records the erection of a shrine over *vajrāsana* by a king, however no trace of it is left.⁶⁶ Following the stone carved *vajrāsana* the early date of the temple

⁶⁴ Rajat Sanyal, “Antichak”, in Abdul M Chowdhury and Ranabir Chakravarti (eds), *History of Bangladesh: Early Bengal in Regional Perspectives*, Vol. I, Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 2018, p. 136

⁶⁵ Sanyal, “Antichak”, p. 140.

⁶⁶ Debala Mitra, *Buddhist Monuments*, Calcutta: Sahitya Samsad, 1971, p. 61

has been placed in 1st century BCE.⁶⁷ But the practice of Buddhism had perhaps faced set backs during the early medieval phase.

Sixteen miles northeast of the Gaya town is situated another important seat of Buddhist activities i.e., Kurkihar. A substantial collection of bronze images, 226 in number - have been retrieved from the site which has been considered to have housed an atelier of sculpture. The hoard is generally dated between 9th and 12th centuries CE. It consists of the images of Mañjuśrī, Vasudharā and Jambhala among others. A manuscript of *Aṣṭasahasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* was copied here in the early 12th Century CE.⁶⁸ Cunningham has identified the place with Kukkutapada Vihāra or Kurak Vihāra mentioned by both Faxian and Xuanzang. Located on the foothills of the three rugged hills, the site was visited by Cunningham who noticed a square basement with littered brick and brick-bats on the top of the peak. Following major explorations of the site by Kittoe in 1846 and by Cunningham in 1861 and 1879, Kurkihar was visited by S.K. Saraswati and G.C. Sarkar in 1931. They noticed a 600 square feet mound with 25 feet elevation.⁶⁹ The mound was strewn over with brick-bats and broken parts of the stone sculptures. The site yielded a hoard of bronze images of Buddhist deities.

Recently in the Valgudar village of Lakhisarai district of Bihar, the ruins of a Buddhist monastery have been found on the bank of Kiul River.⁷⁰ The antiquarian remains of Lakhisarai district was surveyed by Beglar, Buchanan and Cunningham who identified a stūpa and a temple at Valgudar, Rajaona, Chowki and Jayanagar. Recent exploration in the region has resulted in the findings of an image inscription on the pedestal of a bhumisparśa Buddha at Valgudar and Rajaona suggest the existence of a Buddhist stūpa and monastery. The site yielded a lot of other antiquities like broken stone pillars with decorative curving and images of Buddhist deity Mahakal. On the

⁶⁷ Rajat Sanyal, "Bodh Gaya", in Abdul M Chowdhury and Ranabir Chakravarti (eds), *History of Bangladesh: Early Bengal in Regional Perspectives*, Vol. I, Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 2018, p. 171

⁶⁸ Pratapaditya Pal, 'A Forgotten Monastery of Ancient Bihar', *South Asian studies*, vol:4, no. 1, 1988: 83-88.

⁶⁹ S.K. Saraswati and G.C. Sarkar, *Kurkihar, Gaya and Bodh-Gaya*, Rajshahi: Varendra Research Society, 1936, pp. 7-8

⁷⁰ Anil Kumar, "Krimila: A Forgotten Adhithana of Early Medieval Eastern India", in *Indian Historical Review*, 38(1), 2011, pp. 23-50

eastern bank of Kiul River at the modern village Ghosi-Kundi remains of a circular brick structure have been found on the mountain top. The structure has been identified as the base of a stūpa.⁷¹

2.2 Patronage pattern and monastic organization: Glimpses from the epigraphical evidence

The functional and organizational base of the Buddhist vihāras was integrally linked to the patronage pattern associated with them. The early medieval state formation and agrarian expansion in Bengal was greatly facilitated by the land grants to the religious institutions. These land grants not only contributed to the strengthening of material base of the vihāras but also initiated accumulation of power in the forms of revenue collection and enjoyment of land rights by the subordinate donors. The basic nature of the patronage pattern was therefore not only religious in nature but was greatly political, creating a network of complex power relation. In the case of the monasteries of eastern India we can identify four principal groups of patrons or benefactors viz. (a) the rulers and their families, (b) the subordinate rulers or officials, (c) the eminent monks of the monastic communities and the (d) laities.⁷² The construction of the superstructure of the vihāras and mahāvihāras was mostly patronized by the former two groups of patrons while the construction of votive stūpas and donation of images might be attributed to the latter two groups of patrons. The principal purpose of the donation was worshipping of Buddha, fulfilling the requirements of the monks and renovation of the monastic structure. The patronage by the laity was principally guided by the practice of dāna and deyadhamma with the objective of acquiring merit which led to the creation of a mutually dependent relationship between the monastic institution and lay population. All the large mahāvihāras of early medieval Bengal including, Nālandā, Vikramśīla, Odantapuri, Sompura, Jagaddala, Salban vihāra etc. received wide range of collective patronage from the royal power, subordinate rulers, monks and laity in different forms.

A distinguished patronage pattern of the Buddhist vihāra lied in the donation of the subordinate rulers and officials. Though the Pāla rulers were conventionally credited for the establishment of the large-scale monasteries in early medieval Bengal, their inscriptions, however provide an alternative picture of indirect patronage. In other words, most of the Pāla land grant charters in favour of the Buddhist vihāras, actually recorded the donation of their subordinate

⁷¹ Kumar, “Krimila”, p. 47.

⁷² Suchandra Ghosh, *Patronage of Buddhist Monasteries in Eastern India (600-1300 CE)*, Oxford Research Encyclopedia, accessed from <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.013.811>

rulers. After surveying twenty four Pāla inscriptions, Sayantani Pal has shown that it is the subordinates like mahāsāmantas, mahāsenapatis and mahāsainyapatis who petitioned for the donation of land for the various Buddhist vihāras.⁷³ This pattern might be culled out from the Murshidabad Plate of Dharmapāla, Jagajjivanpur Copperplate of Mahendrapāla, Mohipur Plate Gopāla II, Nālandā Copperplate of Dharmapāla and Nālandā Copperplate of Devapāla - all of which recorded the patronage by the subordinate rulers and officials. It is also noteworthy that all the Pāla land grant charters dedicated to the Buddhist vihāras belonged to the early Pāla rulers up to Gopāla II, after which the Pāla patronage significantly shifted towards the Brahmanical individuals and institutions. Despite their usage of Buddhist titles like paramasaugata and paramabhattachāraka and the symbol of dharmachakra in the royal emblem, the Pāla rulers themselves hardly donated any lands to the Buddhist establishments. The subordinate rulers and officials therefore created their own network of patronage aimed at gaining greater political control and autonomy in their respective regions.

Another group of patrons was comprised of the Buddhist monks who have been the leading donors of saṅgha from the earliest time. Two inscriptions during the Pāla reign – Chaprakot Inscription and Nālandā Inscription of Vipulaśrīmitra attest to the wealth of the eminent monks named Mañjuśrījñāna and Vipulaśrīmitra who sponsored erection of a principal door and a vihārikā respectively.⁷⁴ The Nālandā inscription of monk Vipulaśrīmitra was composed to commemorate the building of a viharika by the monk himself. This inscription is devoted to eulogizing Vipulaśrīmitra's monastic lineage. It recorded multiple endowment by Vipulaśrīmitra made at various places for the purpose of acquiring merit. He was a wealthy monk donating images and constructing the vihāras and vihārikā in a number of places. Apart from building a vihāra at Nālandā, he also donated a Prajñāpāramitā manuscript at the Khasarpaṇa temple and donated four images at the alms-houses at on a holy occasion.⁷⁵ The inscription also recorded that he built an Aṣṭamahābhaya Tārā temple at Somapura with a courtyard, a tank and a group of cells. This can

⁷³ Sayantani Pal, 'Religious Patronage in the Land Grant Charters of Early Bengal (Fifth–Thirteenth Century)', *Indian Historical Review*, 2014, 41(2), p. 191.

⁷⁴ Sanjukta Datta, "Building for the Buddha: Patrons in the Pāla Kingdom", in *Studies in History*, 35(2), 2019, p. 164

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, p. 174

be corroborated with the south-facing oblong temple with a sanctum, a pillared mandapa and a circumambulatory path situated about 300 yards east of the main monastic complex at Paharpur.

The organizational development of Buddhist vihāra and their functional aspect in relation to landholding and agrarian economy can be grasped by the study of the land grant charters of early medieval Bengal.⁷⁶ The vihāras primarily functioned as the great academic centre of learning and teaching. However, in connection to its extensive landholdings they developed an organizational basis to manage the landed property. The material basis of the Buddhist vihāras in early medieval Bengal was closely tied to the foundation, maintenance and the subsistence need of the resident monks. The land grant process, generating landed property for the Buddhist vihāras, was governed by the complex political power relation between the semi-independent local rulers and the supreme sovereign. The Buddhist vihāras of early medieval Bengal became an integral part of this politics of land facilitated by the donation of land for the construction of vihāras with the donors aspiring for religious merit and greater political power in exchange. Different phases of development of this relationship and organizational bases can be grasped by the study of early medieval inscriptions.

In the sixth century CE, two particular inscriptions i.e. Gunaighar copperplate inscription of Vaiṇyagupta and Jayrampur copperplate inscription of the time of Gopachandra recorded land grant for the construction and maintenance of two Buddhist vihāras. The Gunaighar copperplate (507 CE), belonging to the Samataṭa sub-region records the donation of large sized waste/fallow land with complete enjoyment and rent-free status petitioned by maharaja Rudradatta, a subordinate ruler of maharaja Vaiṇyagupta.⁷⁷ The purpose of this donation were manifold like offering of perfume, flower, lamp and incense for the Buddha, the enjoyment of robes, alms food, bedding, seating, medicine for the sick and so on for the bhikṣusaṅgha and repair of mutilated parts of the building. Rudradatta took the burden of constructing the vihāra in the name of a Mahāyāna Śākya monk and scholar named Śāntideva. The petition of Rudradatta to Maharaja Vaiṇyagupta requesting donation of land for the purpose of constructing a vihāra also represented a complexity of relation between political actors. The land grant probably was a tool of legitimizing

⁷⁶ For details see Ryosuke Furui, “Buddhist *Viharas* in Early Medieval Bengal: Organizational Development and Historical Context”, in *Buddhism, Law and Society*, 7 (2021-2022), pp. 99-142.

⁷⁷ D.C. Sircar (ed), *Select Inscriptions Bearing on Indian History and Civilization* Vol. 1: *From the Sixth Century B.C. to the Sixth Century A.D.*, Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1965, pp. 340–345

Rudradatta's power over the local cultivator of the land marking an enhancement of his power by royal sanction.⁷⁸ Similar legitimating of power was also intended by the subordinate ruler Acyuta who petitioned for donation of land to construct a vihāra in the Jayarampur plate of the time of Gopachandra in the second half of sixth century.⁷⁹ Thus, the two sixth century inscriptions from Samataṭa and Rāḍha respectively show that the Buddhist vihāras were firmly established institution supported by their landholdings and associated with the power relations between different political forces.

The seventh and eighth century land grant charters demonstrate further expansion of the material base and organization of the Buddhist vihāras in Bengal. The Kailan copperplate inscription of Samataṭeśvara Śrīdharanarāta recorded the donation of 25 patakas of cultivated land plots both to the Three Jewels (ratnatraya) and the Brāhmaṇas, petitioned by mahāsandhivigrahādhikṛta Jayanātha who was a subordinate ruler.⁸⁰ The two Ashrafpur plates of Devakhaḍga in the western Samataṭa delineated a change in the material base.⁸¹ These land grant charters indicated a reallocation and transfer of the tenure rights of the land from the cultivators to the Buddhist vihāras. The accumulation of these rights enabled the Buddhist vihāras to strengthen their material base.

The two 8th century CE inscriptions of Devatideva of Harikela from present day Chittagong area attest to the presence of Buddhist vihāras in this area. The Harikela copperplate grant of Devātideva, dated year 12 of his reign, recorded the donation of seven land plots and a large house with a tax collection right.⁸² The purpose of the donation was to worship and offering food to the Tathāgata, enjoying the saṃgha of present and future meritorious noble bhikṣus and repair of the shattered parts of the Pañcatalavanavihāra. The metal vase inscription of Devatideva on the other hand recorded the five land purchases in the Harikelamaṇḍala to a Buddhist vihāra called Dharmasabhāvihāra.⁸³ During the 7th and 8th centuries CE the Buddhist vihāras were not only

⁷⁸ Furui, "Buddhist *Viharas* in Early Medieval Bengal", p. 107

⁷⁹ Ibid, p. 108

⁸⁰ Ryosuke Furui, *Land and Society in Early South Asia: Eastern India 400–1250 AD*, London and New York: Routledge, 2020, pp. 105–113.

⁸¹ D.C. Sircar (ed), *Select Inscriptions Bearing on Indian History and Civilization* Vol. 2: *From the Sixth to the Eighteenth Century A.D.*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1983, pp. 41–43

⁸² Ryosuke Furui, "Buddhist *Viharas* in Early Medieval Bengal", p. 116

⁸³ Gouriswar Bhattacharya, "A Preliminary Report on the Inscribed Metal Vase from the National Museum of Bangladesh," in Debala Mitra (ed), *Explorations in Art and Archaeology of South Asia:*

dependent on the patronage of the ruling elites, but ventured themselves to acquire landholdings. Their material base was further bolstered by their right on the share of the products yielded from a land.

The two consecutive centuries i.e. ninth and tenth centuries CE witnessed a basic change in the land grant process towards Brahmanical and Buddhist institutions where the kings of the two formidable dynasties namely the Pāla and the Chandra held monopoly on issuing copperplate grants. None of the eleven Chandra plates recorded land donations to the Buddhist vihāras. Nonetheless, the Paschimbhag plate of Śrīchandra indirectly mentioned the landholdings of Three Jewel which was kept outside the land donated to the Brahmanical mathas and six thousand brahmanas.⁸⁴ The Pāla inscriptions too show that very few numbers of Buddhist monasteries were granted land during their reign. The Indian Museum Plate of Dharmapāla dated year 26 of his reign, recorded a donation of a land over several settlements petitioned by mahāsāmanta Bhadrānāga.⁸⁵ He requested the king to donate the land plots consisting of different settlements for the bhikṣusaṃgha residing in a vihāra constructed by him in the village Antaravaṇika. After analyzing this particular inscription, Furui has shown that the mahāvihāra complexes of early medieval Bengal embodied a host of Buddhist institutions like vihāra, vihārikā and gandhakūti, each of which had its own saṃgha with landholdings.⁸⁶

In the Harikela region in tenth century a metal vase inscription can be attribute to Rājādhirāja Attakaradeva who donated a land tract to venerable elder Dharmadatta for the construction of a mathika or a small shrine by the petition of mahāpratihāra Sahadeva for the worship of lord Manindra or the Buddha.⁸⁷ The purpose of the donation was to worship of lord Tathāgata, providing of cloth, alms food, bedding, seating for the saṃgha of noble bhikṣus attached to the Velavihāra and the repair of the abode of Tathāgata. The eminent monk sthāvira

Essays Dedicated to N. G. Majumdar, Calcutta: Directorate of Archaeology and Museums, 1996, pp. 237–247.

⁸⁴ D.C. Sircar, *Epigraphic Discoveries in East Pakistan*, Calcutta: Sanskrit College, 1973, p. 68

⁸⁵ Ryosuke Furui, “Indian Museum Copper Plate Inscription of Dharmapala, Year 26: Tentative Reading and Study,” in *South Asian Studies* 27, no. 2 (2011), pp. 145–156.

⁸⁶ Ryosuke Furui, “Buddhist Viharas in Early Medieval Bengal”, p. 121

⁸⁷ Gouriswar Bhattacharya, “An Inscribed Metal Vase Most Probably from Chittagong, Bangladesh,” in Adalbert J. Gail and GJR Mevissen (eds), *South Asian Archaeology 1991: Proceedings of the Eleventh International Conference of the Association of South Asian Archaeologists in Western Europe Held in Berlin 1-5 July 1991*, Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1993, pp. 323-338.

Dharmadatta in this case received the donation on behalf of the saṃgha which was benefitted by the material endowment.

The ninth and tenth century copperplates portrayed a picture where extraordinary power in relation to the land was conferred upon the subordinate rulers who helped strengthening the material base of the vihāra. The further development of the organizational structure of the vihāra was also underway as this was needed to manage diverse activities like writing or copying of texts, worshipping the scriptures like the *Prajñāpāramitā* and the associated rituals. From late ninth century onwards the Pāla kings stopped granting lands to the subordinate rulers, probably with an attempt to counter the encroachment upon royal power. Instead, they started donating more lands to the Brāhmaṇas who were key players in the emerging social and political network.⁸⁸ However, the direct involvement of the Pāla rulers in the construction of vihāra can be discerned from the description of *Rāmacarita* which credited Rāmapāla with the construction of Jagaddala mahāvihāra in the 11th century.⁸⁹ The Manhali and the Rajibpur grants of Madanapāla in the middle of twelfth century recorded that the enclosed land of the Three Jewel included in the royal estate (*rājasambhoga*) should be kept outside the boundary of the land donated to the Brāhmaṇas.⁹⁰ In the face of the weakening Pāla power, political patronage towards the Buddhist religious institutions continued by the local rulers. Subordinate rulers like Kalyānavardhana established a mahāvihāra at Kutumvavilla as recorded in the Chaprakot stone inscription.⁹¹ The patronage by the subordinate rulers can also be observed in the 12th century fragmentary Vajrayogīnī plate of Samalavarman.⁹² The inscription recorded a royal land grant to a Buddhist establishment for the purpose of worshipping *Prajñāpāramitā* and other Buddhist deities. The Rākṣaskhali copperplate of Maḍommaṇapāla records the grant of the village to Mahāraṇaka Vāsudeva who was a student

⁸⁸ Ryosuke Furui, “Subordinate Rulers under the Pālas: Their Diverse Origins and Shifting Power Relation with the King,” in *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 54, no. 3 (2017), pp. 348–349.

⁸⁹ Radhagovinda Basak (tr.), *Rāmacaritam of Sandhyākaranandin*, Calcutta: The Asiatic Society, 1969, p. 3.

⁹⁰ Ryosuke Furui, ‘Rajibpur Copperplate Inscriptions of Gopāla IV and Madanapāla,’ *Pratna Samiksha: A Journal of Archaeology*, New Series 6 (2015), p. 53.

⁹¹ Ryosuke Furui, “Chaprakot Stone Inscription of the Time of Gopāla IV, Year 9,” in Alamgir Muhammad Serajuddin et al. (eds), *Centenary Commemorative Volume (1913–2013)*, Dhaka: Bangladesh National Museum, 2013, p. 111.

⁹² N. K. Bhattasali, “Two Grants of Varmans of Vanga,” in *Epigraphia Indica* 30 (1953–54), pp. 259–263.

of the Kāṇva school of the Yajurveda in 1196 CE.⁹³ The ruler probably belonged to another Pāla lineage and was ruling from Ayodhya, identified with a place in Diamond Harbour area of South 24 Pargana district. The copperplate mentions the presence of ratna-traya or a Buddhist establishment, whose landholdings were excluded from the grant.⁹⁴

The management of the extensive landholdings of the vihāras as well as its various other functionalities can be gleaned from Yijing's description who visited India in the latter half of the seventh century. He has recorded the daily lives and activities of the monks at Nālandā mahāvihāra and Varāhavihāra in Tāmralipti.⁹⁵ According to him the monastic rules were principally guided by the Vinaya which suggested the saṅgha that after the cultivation of paddy field the product must be shared with the servants and other families. Only one sixth of the crops can be retained by the vihāra. The saṅgha provided the cultivator with cattle and land, but they themselves never involved in the cultivation. In Tāmralipti he witnessed that the householders gathering the agricultural produce outside the vihāra and after dividing it into three parts they took home two third of the shares, leaving one third for the saṅgha to consume. Yijing's account mentioned four administrative officials in the vihāra – shoushi, weina, zhishi and jianjiao.⁹⁶ The first two have been identified as the translation of the Sanskrit term *karmadāna* by Ryosuke Furui.⁹⁷ They were assigned with different duties like striking the bell, supervising food arrangement for guest monk and inspecting water of the well every morning.

The glimpses of organizational base of the Buddhist vihāras of early medieval Bengal, especially of Nālandā mahāvihāra might also be gleaned from the two clay seals found from the Nālandā excavation, 1863-71. The two clay seals read “*śrī-Nālandā-cātu-[rddiśika-samavāri]ka-bhikṣu-saṅghasya*” and “*śrī-Nālandā-satraka-samavārika-bhikṣuṅām*.”⁹⁸ The latter seal might

⁹³ Ramesh K. Ghoshal, “Rakshashkali Island Plate of Modammanapala, Saka 1118”, *Epigraphia Indica*, Vol. 27, 1947-48, p. 120.

⁹⁴ D.C. Sircar, “Rākṣhaskhāli (Sundarban) Plate, Saka 1118,” *Epigraphia Indica*, Vol 30, 1987, pp. 45-46.

⁹⁵ J. Takakusu (tr.), *A Record of the Buddhist Religion as Practiced in India and Malay Archipelago by I-tsing*, Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1966, pp. lii-liii

⁹⁶ Rongxi Li, *Buddhist Monastic Traditions of Southern Asia: A Record of the Inner Law Sent Home from the South Seas by Śramaṇa Yijing (Taisho Volume 54, Number 2125)*, Berkeley: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, 2000, p. 135

⁹⁷ Ryosuke Furui, “Buddhist Viharas in Early Medieval Bengal”, pp. 130-133.

⁹⁸ Chitralekha Hazra, *Social and Cultural Life in Religious Complexes in Bengal and Bihar: 600 CE - 1300 CE*, Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Calcutta, 2022, p. 83

indicate the existence of an official who was in the charge of the storehouse of alms food in Nālandā mahāvihāra. The term *samavārika* in the two legends might stand for the functionaries who worked under the supervision of *vārika*. Another clay seal bears the legends ‘śrī-śūravi..karma’ who was probably appointed for the management of gandhakuti or the perfumed chamber. Textual reference of the existence of several managerial posts within the monastic organization occurs in a ninth century Tibetan text called *Mahāvvyutpatti*, a lexical work explaining the meaning of some Sanskrit and Tibetan terms.⁹⁹ The text mentions a host of monastic offices who were responsible for the supervision of different departments. These offices, one can assume, probably played a pivotal role in the organizational structure of the early medieval vihāra.

From late seventh century the Buddhist vihāras of greater Bengal was therefore, a key player in the agrarian economy where the landholdings of the vihāra initiated a share-cropping system in rural Bengal. Despite the ownership of the land the saṅgha or its members did not participate in the agrarian production and tenancy right was distributed among the servants, householders and cultivators of the land. The organizational base of the vihāra was facilitated by the presence of several administrative personnel who had distinctive roles to play.

2.3 Locating the vihāras within the intra-Asian network of Buddhist tantra

From the hard findings of the archaeological excavation of the Buddhist vihāras and shrines, we can only partially grasp the tantric practices of the monks. Neither do the copperplate inscriptions mentioning a few details about the monks and saṅgha lead us to conclude the tantric characteristics therein. However, when corroborated with the contemporary texts, the archaeological findings and inscriptional data might appear instrumental in understanding the tantric rituals practice of the vihāras and their residents. We may also attempt to understand the tantric leanings of the Buddhist monasteries by referring to the tantric commentarial and exegetical texts composed by the Buddhist resident scholar of the vihāras. The vihāras of early medieval Bengal can be also contextualized within the broader spectrum of Buddhism in Asia by analyzing their spatial and ritual characters. The paradigm of inter-regional exchange between the eastern Indian vihāras and the contemporary south-east Asian Buddhist centres may aid us to spatially locate the vihāras within an esoteric network. The ritual landscape, on the other hand, might be

⁹⁹ Chitralakha Hazra, *Social and Cultural Life in Religious Complexes in Bengal and Bihar*, pp. 84-85

gleaned by analyzing the vihāras' architectural feature as well as the possible tantric implication of the ritualistic culture associated with the artefacts yielded by them.

It has been propounded that primarily the early medieval maritime network across the Bay of Bengal facilitated the efflorescence of esoteric Buddhism across different coastal regions of south and south-east Asia.¹⁰⁰ The Buddhist vihāras of the coastal area and hinterlands of Bengal too formed a part of this esoteric network through which ideas and culture were transmitted. The mercantile class, enforced by their social and economic power was often credited with the overseas spreading of esoteric Buddhism. This was also possible due to the dynamic nature of Buddhism as opposed to the 'static' Brahmanism which deemed the overseas travel profane. Not only the traders, but the lay householders, involved in trade and craft production became important agents of esoteric Buddhist cult by their pilgrimage, travel and migration.¹⁰¹ However, Andrea Acri has warned against readily accepting a 'diffusionist' theory of the transmission of esoteric Buddhism from the south Asian 'heartland' to east and south-east Asian 'periphery'. Instead, he contends that cults were being transmitted through multiple centres rather than a 'mono-directional' pattern.¹⁰² Tantric elements in Buddhism gained momentum in the 8th century CE and eventually became a 'pan-Asian phenomenon.' Acri further argues that its expansion was facilitated by a few Buddhist masters with a cosmopolitan vision and international aspiration. They earned direct sponsor and recognition by the state and royal powers between the 8th to 12th centuries CE like the Candras and Pālas of eastern India, Bhaumakāras in Odisha, Yarlung dynasty in Tibet, the second Lambakannas in Sri Lanka, the Śailendras and Srivijayan rulers in Java, Sumatra and Malay Peninsula, the Chinese Tang dynasties, the later Silla dynasty in Korea and the Japanese imperial dynasty in the Heian period.¹⁰³ While the mid-8th century drive marked the 'first wave' of esoteric Buddhist movement, the 'second wave' can be dated in the 11th century and remained an uninterrupted force till the 13th century across the maritime Asia supported by kings like Jayavarman VII of Cambodia, Krtanagara in east Java and Kublai Khan in China. These Asian dynasties actively patronised

¹⁰⁰ Andrea Acri (ed), *Esoteric Buddhism in Medieval Maritime Asia: Networks of Masters, Texts, Icons*, Singapore: ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute, 2016.

¹⁰¹ Andrea Acri, "Introduction: Esoteric Buddhist Networks along the Maritime Silk Routes, 7th – 13th century AD", in Andrea Acri (ed), *Esoteric Buddhism in Medieval Maritime Asia: Networks of Masters, Texts, Icons*, Singapore: ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute, 2016, pp. 4-5.

¹⁰² Ibid, p. 10

¹⁰³ Ibid, pp. 7-8.

Tantric Buddhist rituals as a mean to achieve political power. The esoteric nature of the early medieval Buddhist vihāras thus become apparent when analyzed in the backdrop of the cultural interaction through the strategic crossroads of South, South-east and Central Asia.

The Buddhist vihāras which became the pioneer centres of learning like, Nālandā and Vikramśīla in eastern India, Abhaygīrivihāra at Anuradhapura in Sri Lanka and the Buddhist institution of eminence in Sumatra constituted the diplomatic and commercial network with south-east Asian kingdoms. This phenomenon can be attested by the existence of a Śailendra monastery at Nālandā and Nakapattinam, Sinhalese monastic complex at central Java, the survival of the Sanskrit and vernacular text material of Mantranaya and Vajrayāna and the remains of statues and monuments in the Buddhist centres of south-east Asia.¹⁰⁴ The maritime interconnectedness might also be grasped by the itinerary of the Atīśa Dīpaṅkara (982-1054 CE) who travelled to Indonesia from eastern India. After being ordained as a Buddhist monk he received teaching from Master Dharmakīrti of Suvarṇadvīpa, presently Sumatra, from 1012 to 1024 CE. He travelled to Indonesia on a merchant ship and after completing his studies returned to India to teach at Nālandā and Vikramśīla.¹⁰⁵ Nālandā's tantric connection has been emphasized along with Sompura, Odantapuri, Vikramśīla and Jagaddala by referring to its reputed Vajrayāna teachers. The inscription of the Mahārāja Balaputradeva of Suvarṇadvīpa also refers to the religious tenets such as 'bodhisattvas well-versed in tantras' and thus implying the tantric practice of the monastery.¹⁰⁶ The worship of the stūpas in all the major Buddhist centres of the eastern India from the 8th century CE onwards is attested by the proliferation in the construction of stūpas. The kriyā and caryā tantras emphatically emphasised on the worship of stūpas as can be seen in the Vajrayāna texts.¹⁰⁷

The Chinese pilgrims like Xuanzang and Yijing mentioned in their travelogues a few masters of the Buddhist monasteries in eastern India. For example, Xuanzang mentioned Ācārya Śīlabhadra, Dharmapāla, Candrapāla, Guṇamati, Sthiramati, Jinamitra etc. whose academic works increased the fame of Nālandā.¹⁰⁸ Yijing spoke of Ācārya Ratnasimha of Nālandā, along with few

¹⁰⁴ Acri, "Introduction", p. 10.

¹⁰⁵ Himanshu Prabha Ray, "Buddhist Monuments Across the Bay of Bengal: Cultural Routes and Maritime Networks", in *Trans-Regional and National Studies of Southeast Asia*, 2019, p. 3

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, p. 4

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, p. 6

¹⁰⁸ Samuel Beal (tr.), *Su-Yu-Ki: Buddhist Records of the Western World*, vol-2, New Delhi: Oriental Books Reprint Corporation, 1969, p. 171.

other scholars already mentioned by Xuanzang. He also mentioned Master Gñānacandra, a master of law in the Tilodhā monastery (Telhara) in Magadha.¹⁰⁹ When Tibetan scholars started visiting Nālandā and Vikramśīla during 8th – 10th centuries CE, the eastern Indian monasteries became more vibrant centres of Buddhism. Indian scholars from these centres too visited Tibet for religious proselytization and facilitating the cultural exchange from both the ends.¹¹⁰ Lama Tāranātha has mentioned the names of the tantric Vajrācāryas of Vikramśīla like Buddhajñānapada, Vairaconarakṣitā, Jetāri, Dipaṅkarabhadra, Laṅkājayabhadra, Śrīdhara, Bhavabhadra, Lilāvajra, Durjayachandra etc.¹¹¹ The tantric work alluded to Buddhajñānapada in the Tibetan catalogues includes Śrīherukasādhanā, Guhyajambhalasādhanā, Gativyūha etc.¹¹² Vairaconarakṣitā composed Raktayamārisādhanā, Śikṣākusumamañjarīnāmā etc., while tantric works like Hevajrasyasekaniscayanāma, Śrīdaśakrodhāvidyāvishināma, Nāthakṣobhyasādhanā were attributed to Jetāri.¹¹³ The tantric pandits of the Nālandā mahāvihāra mentioned in the Tibetan catalogue include Śāntarakṣita, Padmasambhava, Kamalaśīla, Buddhakīrti, Karṇaśrī etc. Ācārya Śāntarakṣita went to Tibet to spread Buddhism by the invitation of the king Sron-tsan-gampo in 749 CE.¹¹⁴ His disciple Padmasambhava too went to Tibet in the later part of the 8th century CE and became authoritative figure of Tibetan esoteric Buddhism. The Jagaddala vihāra was the home of the tantric pandits like Dānaśīla, Subhākara, and Mokṣāgupta who have been attributed to numerous tantric commentaries. Thus, the cross-cultural exchange between Tibet and eastern Indian monasteries brings to light the academic practice of tantrism prevalent in the vihāra.

The most incisive argument foregrounding the early medieval Buddhist vihāras of India in the esoteric form of Buddhism came from Ronald Davidson who contends that the saṅgha communities and institution was the result of a ‘complex matrix of medieval force’.¹¹⁵ By drawing the metaphor of the consecration process of a junior mantra practitioner who becomes overlord or rājādhirāja after coronation, he argues that the Mantrayāna was a politically infused Buddhist form

¹⁰⁹ J. Takakusu (tr and ed), *A Record of the Buddhist Religion as Practiced in India and Malay Archipelago (AD 671-695)*, Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1966, p. 181.

¹¹⁰ Sarat Chandra Das, *Indian Pandits in the Land of Snow*, Calcutta Baptist Mission Press, 1893.

¹¹¹ Puspa Niyogi, *Buddhism in Ancient Bengal*, Calcutta: Jinsasa, 1960, p. 134.

¹¹² Phanindranath Bose, *Indian Teachers of Buddhist Universities*, Madras: Theosophical Publishing House, 1923, p. 38.

¹¹³ Ibid, pp. 48-49.

¹¹⁴ Ibid, p. 125.

¹¹⁵ Ronald M Davidson, *Indian Esoteric Buddhism: A Social History of Tantric Movement*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2002, p. 114.

reflecting and adopting the medieval language of power exhibition. This ‘institutional esoterism’ succeeded in most of the Buddhist centres where Buddhist tantra prospered. Buddhist monks of the early medieval Indian vihāras were credited with supporting, performing and interpreting the scriptures and rituals of institutional esoteric Buddhism.¹¹⁶ The mantra and maṇḍala practice often symbolized the central metaphor of the mature esoteric Buddhism where the language of kingship and dominance were reflected. The monk obtained consecration (abhiṣeka) from his preceptor (Vajrācārya) and then took pride in his divinity (devatābhimāna), followed by his dominance in the sacred circle (maṇḍala) of different families (kula). Each step of this process might find parallel with the coronation of a king whose subordinate vassals formed a maṇḍala like structure of power.¹¹⁷

One of the primary constituent elements of this esoteric Buddhism was the consecration process which witnessed a systematic development in rites and rituals by the 8th century CE. The principal tantric texts outlining the tidbits of consecration process or abhiṣeka was the *Vajrapāṇi-abhiṣeka-mahātantra* mentioned by Haribhadra during the reign of Dharmapāla in the late 8th century CE.¹¹⁸ The text prescribed the occult method of acquiring the magical ability of Vajrapāṇi by the means of psychic meditation. Vivid description of consecration might also be found in the *Mahāvairocanābhisambhōtantra* interpreted by the mid-8th century CE commentator Buddhaguhya who was active in Nālandā around 8th century CE.¹¹⁹ His contemporary Mañjuśrīmitra, another resident of Nālandā also explained a number of consecratory methods involving water, crown, vajra and bell. The sacred space for the performance of the consecration process described in these texts may not always be contextualized in a monastic complex with certainty, despite monks performing these rites. Moreover, there were different set of rules of consecration applicable to the monks and the laymen. For example, in the *Guhyasiddhi* we hardly come across any reference of the residents in the monastic institution. The text rather delineated its targeted audience as the ascetics living in the cave and forests coming to town with their alms

¹¹⁶ Davidson, *Indian Esoteric Buddhism*, pp. 153-160.

¹¹⁷ Ibid, p 121.

¹¹⁸ Ibid, p. 126.

¹¹⁹ Stephen Hodge (tr), *The Mahāvairocana Abhisambodhi Tantra with Buddhaguhya's Commentary*, New York: Routledge, 2003, p. 22.

owl.¹²⁰ The rituals of the *Guhyasiddha* were equally effective for a householder who was advised to practice it in secrecy in the night. Therefore, both the monk and the non-residential ascetic as well as the layman enjoyed the right to practice the esoteric rituals which were not exclusively confined in the monastic boundaries.

The process of making land sacred through the ritual performance has been shown by Benjamin Fleming after analyzing the Copperplate charters issued by the Chandra rulers of Southeast Bengal.¹²¹ Though the Chandra Copperplates began with an appeal to the three jewels (Buddha, Sangha and Dharma), they were mostly dedicated to the Brāhmaṇa donees. Fleming has shown that the Copperplate charters were not merely recording the economic transaction in the form of land, but possessed broader religious and ritual implications. The Chandra land grant inscriptions contained the oral, ritual and performative component. The inscriptional literature was activated with performance of rituals aiming to sanctify the land. Fleming has argued that the land was like a ceremonial complex where both the king and the Brāhmaṇa donees performed rituals for its purification and protection. The water rite (*udakapūrva*) and proclaiming rites (*bodhāyati*) mentioned in the Chandra plates, were performed by the king and had deep sacred connotation.¹²²

Conceptualizing the sexual initiation process in the monastic fold has garnered much interest among the scholars who argued that this was a heterodox practice.¹²³ Though the monastic religious organization wanted to employ strict discipline, it was transgressed with several unconventional practices. The celibacy supposed to be practiced by the monks outlined in the Vinaya was not compatible with the sexual tantric practice. The *kriyāsaṃgrahapañjikā* of Kuladatta (11th century) explicitly described the sexual initiation process of a novice student involving a master and a consort.¹²⁴ The prominent Buddhist scholar Abhayākaragupta (late 11th century), resident of Vikramśīla mahāvihāra, was credited with the composition of a text named *Vajrāvali* which was an all-purpose ritual manual. In this text Abhayākaragupta has propounded several theories about tantric initiation practice. He stated that in order to become an eligible

¹²⁰ Isabelle Onians, *Tantric Buddhist Apologetics or Antinomianism as a Norm*, Unpublished PhD Thesis, Wolfson College, Oxford, 2002, p. 190

¹²¹ Benjamin J. Fleming, "Making Land Sacred: Inscriptional Evidence for Buddhist Kings and Brahman Priest in Medieval Bengal," in *Numen*, Vol. 60, 2013, p. 561.

¹²² Ibid, pp. 568-569.

¹²³ Onians, *Tantric Buddhist Apologetics*, p. 191

¹²⁴ Ibid, p. 196.

candidate to perform the kriyā and caryā tantra, a student must have gone through the six preliminary initiation steps.¹²⁵ The third initiation process involving sexual rites thus constituted the essential precondition of becoming entitled for higher tantra. He also emphasized on experiencing the bliss of sahaja or innate reality to be able to discuss it. Abhayākaragupta was probably deeply influenced by two preceding texts – *Tattvaratnāvaloka* of Vāgiśvarakīrti and Sujayaśrīgupta’s *Abhiṣekanirūkti* which demonstrates that the bliss experienced in sexual union in the third initiation will guide one to the path of enlightenment.¹²⁶

Prohibition on the monks to take part in higher initiation process came from another famous Buddhist scholar of Bengal – Atīśa Dīpaṅkar, a resident monk of Vikramśīla. By referring to *Paramādibuddhatantra*, a hypothetical root text of the Laghukālacakra, Atīśa Dīpaṅkar stated that a celibate should not take the secret and wisdom initiation.¹²⁷ He also warned against observing this kind of rituals as this would break the vow of an ascetic. The sexual initiation rites were also designated as a pārājika offense which entails expulsion from the saṅgha as outlined in the Vinaya. Atīśa’s *Bodhipādapradīpa* is also a characteristic text eulogizing celibacy which is regarded as the most excellent virtue of all that has been regulated in the Pratimokṣa. In the introductory verses of the text Atīśa emphasized asceticism and forbade higher initiation.¹²⁸ However, Atīśa’s other works like *Homavidhi*, *Pañcacaityanirvāpaṇavidhi*, *Vimaloṣṇīṣadhāraṇīvidhi* etc. can be attributed as tantric literature dealing with the esoteric rituals. These manual texts mostly outlined the different tantric ritualistic paraphernalia of monastic Buddhism of early medieval period. Atīśa’s *Sarvakarmāvaraṇaviśodhananāmamaṅḍalavidhi* for example explained how to draw a maṅḍala on the four sides and four gates with a lotus and eight petals in the centre of the maṅḍala and guardians in the four cardinal directions.¹²⁹ He also prescribed that the great Vajra should be drawn in the centre of the eight petals. The performer should protect himself by meditating on Vajrācārya and contemplating on the image of Akṣobhya. In his *Pañcacaityanirvāpaṇavidhi* he has outlined the practices involving cleansing one’s body and cloths, drawing maṅḍala and placing five caityas

¹²⁵ Onians, *Tantric Buddhist Apologetics*, p. 200.

¹²⁶ Harunaga Isaacson, “Tantric Buddhism in India (From c. AD 800 to c. AD 1200)”, pp. 8-10

¹²⁷ Onians, *Tantric Buddhist Apologetics*, p. 259.

¹²⁸ *Ibid*, p. 260.

¹²⁹ Mochizuki Kaie, “Five Remaining Works on the Esoteric Ritual of Dipamkarasrijnana”, in *Journal of Indian and Buddhist Studies*, Vol. 67, No. 3, 2019, p. 154

on to it.¹³⁰ The maṇḍalas were to be decorated with ribbon of five colours, umbrella and banners and offering had to be made with water, incense, flower and lamp mention of which also occurs in the land grant inscription of early medieval Bengal discussed in the next section of this chapter.

2.4 Tracing tantrism in the material culture of the vihāra: stūpa, maṇḍala and deities

We may note that the tantric consecration was not only meant for the novice student but also was applicable to the material structures like the stūpas and the images. Though offering to images and stūpas was in practice long before the rise of Vajrayāna, the tantric rituals ushered in a new dimension to their sacred consecration.¹³¹ The purpose of the consecration as delineated by Atīśa Dīpaṅkar is to ensure that the dharmadhātu abides in the stūpa or images for a long time.¹³² Atīśa refers to the images, books and stūpas as the receptacle of body, speech and mind respectively. In addition to the core ritual of consecration, there were several ancillaries of the consecration process like ritual bathing of the images and offering of flower, lamp and incense. Yijing saw the images at the monastery at Tāmralipti and Nālandā were being bathed in a particular time of the day by a designated monk.¹³³ The ritual bathing involved a host of complex ritual practices like ringing the bell, holding the fresh water, offering the scented grain oil, offering of bark powder, dairy products, grain water, herbal water and chanting mantra.¹³⁴ We have already noted that the inscriptions of early medieval Bengal have mentioned different paraphernalia for the daily worship of the bodhisattva. The possible tantric implication of these ritual objects has not been mentioned in the inscriptions. In the Gunaighar Inscription (6th century CE), Jayarampur plate (6th century CE), Kailan Inscription (7th century CE) and Jagajivanpur Inscription (8th century CE) we find the mention of perfume, flower, lamp, incense, garland and robe each of which could be regarded as important ritual object needed for tantric consecration.¹³⁵ Though presently the consecration rites are exclusively preserved in *Consecration Tantra* of the Tibetan Tanjur, these

¹³⁰ Kaie, “Five Remaining Works”, p. 155

¹³¹ Yael Bentor, *Consecration of Images and Stupas in Indo-Tibetan Tantric Buddhism*, Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1996, p. 5

¹³² Ibid, p. 10.

¹³³ J. Takakusu (tr and ed), *A Record of the Buddhist Religion as Practiced in India and Malay Archipelago (AD 671-695)*, Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1966, p. xxxi.

¹³⁴ Bentor, *Consecration of Images and Stupas*, pp. 171-188.

¹³⁵ Ryosuke Furui, “Buddhist Viharas in Early Medieval Bengal: Organizational Development and Historical Context”, in *Buddhism, Law and Society*, 7 (2021-2022), pp. 99-142.

rituals could be traced in *Hevajra Tantra*, *Dākārṇava*, *Abhidhānottara* as well as in several commentaries written by Indian master like Atīśa Dīpaṃkar, Advayavajra and Nāro pā.¹³⁶

Though the tradition of stūpa and relic continued in the South Asia from the Mauryan period, its significance under the esoteric Buddhism experienced a modification in the associated ritualist culture. Orzech and Sorensen has pointed out that new esoteric ritual technology was added to the worship of stūpa and relic.¹³⁷ Furthermore, the stūpa and the relics were placed in a ‘particular ideological and semiotic matrix’, in accordance to what has been propounded in the *Sarvatathāgatattvasaṃgraha* (7th century CE), a text of the Indic origin belonging to the yoga tantra class. Many of the 8th – 9th centuries ritual texts of China, translated by the Buddhist master Amoghavajra and his guru Vajrabodhi, explicitly outlined the esoteric rituals required for the consecration of the stūpa and temple. Amoghavajra’s itinerary from the Tang China to the Indian subcontinent and back may aid us in conceptualizing the network through which this esoteric tradition was circulating in a wide region of South, Southeast and Central Asia.¹³⁸

The architectural style of the Buddhist vihāra and shrine of early medieval Bengal bears significant characteristics of maṇḍalaic vihāra. The cruciform shrine with four image chambers in the four cardinal directions may be corresponding to the maṇḍala structure delineated in different tantric texts. From the 8th century CE onwards, the shrines and the vihāras such as Paharpur, Vikramśīla, Salban, Bhoja, Ānanda, Rupban Mura, Bharat Bhyna, etc. started to develop some features hitherto absent in the Buddhist buildings of the previous period. The architectural similarity is also widely found in the contemporary Buddhist structures at Udayagiri and Lalitgiri in Odisha. The structural styling throughout this period was marked by Tantra based landscape as argued by Umakant Mishra.¹³⁹ In the 8th century CE, the construction of stūpa in the Udaygiri area was modeled on garbhadhātumaṇḍala of the *Mahāvairocana Sūtra*, a 7th century CE text attributed to eastern India.¹⁴⁰ Around the 8th century CE, a maṇḍala stūpa and a monastery emerged along

¹³⁶ Bentor, *Consecration of Images and Stupas*, p. 59.

¹³⁷ Charles D. Orzech and Henrik H. Sorensen, “Stupa and Relic in Esoteric Buddhism,” in Charles D. Orzech et. al. (eds), *Esoteric Buddhism and the Tantras in East Asia*, Leiden: Brill, 2011, p. 149.

¹³⁸ Ibid, pp. 150-151.

¹³⁹ Umakant Mishra, “Continuity and Change in the Sacred Landscape of the Buddhist Sites of Udaygiri, Odisha”, in Himanshu Prabha Ray (ed.), *Negotiating Cultural Identity*, New Delhi: Routledge, 2016, p. 237.

¹⁴⁰ Stephen Hodge (tr), *The Mahāvairocana Abhisambodhi Tantra with Buddhaguhya’s Commentary*, New York: Routledge, 2003, p. 22.

with the shrines of Avalokiteśvara and Bhṛkūti in the south of the original approach. Various dhāraṇī plaques were also inserted into the stūpa embodying the vajraḍhātu. Similar maṇḍala structure of the vihāra can also be observed in the Vijayarāma vihāra at Anuradhapura in Sri Lanka. The structure of many of these Sri Lankan vihāras constructed during 8th century is corresponding to the architectural style prescribed in the *Mañjuśrī Vāstuvidyāsāstra*, the only known palm-leaf manuscript of which written in Sinhalese script is preserved in the National Archive in Colombo.¹⁴¹ The text specified the direction in which each of the five Tathāgatas i.e. Amitābha, Vairocana, Akṣobhya, Amoghasiddhi and Ratnasambhava to be placed in the four image chambers surrounding on a central chamber like a maṇḍala structure. By using the maṇḍalas in the architectural organization the Buddhists in the peninsular India were creating a new sacred space and images at the turn of the 8th century CE.

Similar architectural style, the layout of the central shrine of Paharpur monastery also has been identified as symbolically representing garvadhātumaṇḍala.¹⁴² R.D. Banerjee has explained that the main shrine of the Paharpur chamber was probably hollow roofed chamber. S.K. Saraswati on the other hand argued that the Paharpur temple could be a sarvatobhadra style temple given its four shrines on the four cardinal sides of a shaft. The main structure of the temple of Paharpur is comprised of a square hollow shaft in the centre and four rectangular cellas of the four faces of the central shaft leading to the mandapas. Seema Hoque and M.M. Hoque thus argue that the Paharpur temple does not show similarities to the Sarvatobhadra temple style except the uninterrupted gallery around the continuous ambulatory passage.¹⁴³ Though none of the five Dhyānī Buddha has been found from the Paharpur excavation, it was anticipated by the archaeologists that the shrines in the centre of the south, east and west wings of cells exhibiting garbhagrha and mandapas probably housed the images of five Dhyānī Buddhas.¹⁴⁴ Projection on the east south and northern wings of the Temple at Bhasu Vihāra complex might also bears the evidence of housing Dhyānī Buddha. Besides, the monastery of Paharpur also yielded a few images of Dikpālas (guardians of

¹⁴¹ Kellie Marie Powell, *Rituals and Ruins: Recovering the History of Vajrayana Buddhism in Sri Lanka*, Unpublished M.A Thesis, University of California, Barkley, 2018, p. 61.

¹⁴² Swadhin Sen, "Paharpur", p. 359.

¹⁴³ Seema Hoque and M.M. Hoque, "Understanding the Paharpur Temple Architecture in New Perspective," in *Proceedings of the International Seminar on Elaboration of an Archaeological Research Strategy for Paharpur World Heritage Site and Its Environment (Bangladesh)*, 2004, p. 59.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 60

the directions) like Indra, Vāyu, Candra/Soma and Kubera.¹⁴⁵ These deities, described in the Purāṇas as the guardians of four cardinal and four intermediate directions of mundane space, bear the evidence of how spatial directions were conceptualized in a sacred space.

The layouts of the Buddhist architectures of the Mainamati in Comilla including the Salvan Vihāra, Bhoja Vihāra, Ānanda Vihāra and Temples of Rupban Mura, Itakhola Mura shows striking affinity with cruciform structure corresponding to tantric Buddhist maṇḍalas.¹⁴⁶ The ground plan of the central shrine of Bhoja Vihāra is similar to that of Paharpur showing a square shaped shaft in the centre and cells leading to mandapa in the center of the four wings connected by a circumambulatory passage. Stone images of Dhyānī Buddha Amitābha and Akṣobhya and bronze image of Vajrasattva have been found from the western and northern chamber respectively of the central shrine. Cruciform central shrines have also been discovered in the monastic complexes of Ānanda Vihāra and Salban Vihāra yielding images of Bodhisattva Avaloketeśvara and Padmapāṇi. Central square shaft and image chambers at the four cardinal points have also been found in the Rupban Mura of Mainamati. On the drum of the Kutila Mura or Triratna stūpa there are four large size niches at the four cardinal points leading some archaeologists to argue that these were meant for placing the images of Dhyānī Buddhas.¹⁴⁷ Cruciform structure of a stūpa also appeared in the western side of the Itakhola Mura which housed a stucco image of Akṣobhya facing east. Bell shaped bronze votive stūpa in the Salban Vihāra depicting four Buddhas in the four cardinal directions was considered to be the replica of the stūpa structure evolved during the 7th century CE. This bhadrā type of stūpa also found its stylistic parallel in the Ānanda Temple, Pagan in Burma. This leads archaeologists to argue that due to the remarkable similarity between the Paharpur and Pagan Temple in terms of their cruciform shape, we might assume that like Pagan, the Paharpur also housed four dhyānī Buddhas in the four cardinal sides in the past.¹⁴⁸ The cruciform architectural style was not only confined in the northern and south-east Bengal, but was

¹⁴⁵ Gred J.R. Mevissen, “Dikpālas and Grahas in Paharpur in Context of Contemporaneous Pan-Indian Temple Imagery”, in Gerd J.R. Mevissen and Arundhuti Banerji (eds), *Prajñadhara, Essays on Asian Art, History, Epigraphy and Culture in Honour of Gouriswar Bhattacharya*, New Delhi, p. 393.

¹⁴⁶ Several ground plans of vihāra from our context which are oriented to the maṇḍala architecture have been published in the following works: Sen and Alam, “Paharpur”, p. 354, Bhuiyan, “Mainamati”, pp. 269-273, Mita and AKM Syfur Rahman, “Rethinking the Archaeological Remains of Bharat Bhayna” p. 219, B.S. Verma, *Antichak Excavation 2 (1971-1981)* Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India, 2011, pp. 33-75.

¹⁴⁷ Seema Hoque and M.M. Hoque, “Understanding the Paharpur Temple Architecture”, p. 63

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid*, p. 65

standard temple architecture in the south-west Bengal. Reference might be made of the ground plans of Bharat Bhayna and Jhurijhara which was probably built on a maṇḍalaic structure.

The maṇḍala-based architecture of the Buddhist stūpas became a ubiquitous phenomenon of the early medieval Buddhist stūpas distributed in the vast connected Buddhist network of South and Southeast Asia. This has been particularly studied out by Swati Chemburkar in the light of a comparative analysis of Buddhist stūpas at Tabo (Spiti Valley), Kesariya (Champanan, Bihar) and Borobudur (central Java).¹⁴⁹ All three of them shared exemplary architectural and antiquarian similarities. One can unfailingly note the connection between Pāla Bengal and Śailendra ruled Srivijaya in the light of at least six inscriptional evidences.¹⁵⁰ Foremost of these was the Nālandā Inscription of the Śailendra king Balaputradeva (850 CE) which recorded the establishment of a Buddhist monastery. In the same monastery an inscribed verse on a miniature stūpa recorded lines of the Buddhist text *Bhadracarīpraṇidhāna* which also mentioned the reliefs of the Borobudur.¹⁵¹ One of the connecting agents between Bengal, Java and Spiti were itinerant Buddhist masters like Atīśa Dīpaṅkara, who travelled to Java to learn esoteric Buddhism under Dharmakīrti in 1012 CE and then came back to India and went to Tabo in 1042 CE when the monastery was under renovation.¹⁵² The Vajradhātu maṇḍala of *Sarvathāgatattvasaṃgraha*, an 7th century yoga tantra text with possible origin in south India seems to have become the model of architecture of the Buddhist stūpa and vihāra of an extensive South and Southeast Asian regions. East Java yielded a bronze piece on which there was an inscribed Vajradhātu maṇḍala of 11th century. Similarly, deities of Vajradhātu maṇḍala and vajra motifs have been found from the Buddhist temple at Muara Jambi and Candi Gumpung in Sumatra.¹⁵³ Mantras of Vajradhātu maṇḍala inscribed on the gold foil has also been unearthed from the Ratu Boko near Prambanan temple during the reign of Sailendra dynasty.

In the Pāla domain the similar architectural pattern might be noticed in the large Buddhist monasteries like Uddanapura (Bihar Sharif), Vikramśīla, and Paharpur. The vihāras of Mainamati

¹⁴⁹ Swati Chemburkar, “Stupa to Mandala: Tracing a Buddhist Architectural Development from Kesariya to Borobudur to Tabo,” *Pacific World*, Vol. 3, No. 20, 2018, pp. 169-221.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid*, p. 203.

¹⁵¹ Gregory Schopen, “A Verse from the *Bhadracarīpraṇidhāna* in a 10th Century Inscription Found at Nālandā,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 12 (1989): 149–157.

¹⁵² Chemburkar, “Stupa to Mandala,” p. 171.

¹⁵³ *Ibid*, pp. 172-175.

too gradually adopted this stūpa-maṇḍala model.¹⁵⁴ At the center of these monastic structures lied the cruciform temple or stūpa with four cardinal chambers. The similar stylistic arrangements of the sacred space in the Buddhist monasteries of contemporary Bengal, Java and Myanmar undoubtedly portrayed a shared knowledge of Buddhist architecture.

The sculptural reliefs found in many of the vihāras discussed also may be considered here as they indicate a few significant processes of modifications in the orientation of Buddhist practices in the region. A curious phenomenon that is noted in this regard is the integration of the brahmanical pantheon in the Buddhist precincts. In the Paharpur mahāvihāra, for example we find 63 stone sculptures embellished in the niche of the main temple. The images comprise of deities like Kṛṣṇa, Śiva, and Brahmā. Brahmanical deities are also visible in the Buddhist shrine/stūpa in the dharmadhātucityas of the Kathmandu valley, Nepal. A.J. Gail has argued that the Brahmanical deities of the Paharpur as well as of Kathmandu valley were conforming to the Dharmadhātuvāgiśvara maṇḍala of the *Niṣpannayogāvalī*.¹⁵⁵ In the said maṇḍala, Mañjuśrī replaced Vairocana as the central deity along with 81 Brahmanical deity in the periphery. Similar preponderance of Brahmanical deities, mostly depicting Brahmā, Indra, Śiva, and Viṣṇu have been found to embellish the exterior wall and seals of the Nālandā monastery no. 2. Debala Mitra proposed to explain the prevalence of Brahmanical deity in the Paharpur monastery with the idea that these images were probably removed from Brahmanical structures and installed there.¹⁵⁶ K.N. Dikshit also found it to be strange that such a large number of Brahmanical deities were installed in Paharpur.¹⁵⁷ According to A.J. Gail, the figures of Kṛṣṇa, Brahmā, Balarāma and astral deities like Indra, Vāyu and Agni in the Paharpur temple were serving as peripheral deities of Buddhist maṇḍala for protection. Almost similar hypothesis has been proposed by Claudine Bautze-Picron with regard to the Nālandā monastery no. 2 which housed Brahmā, Indra and Śiva.¹⁵⁸ B.N. Prasad has argued that the donation of Brahmanical images to the Buddhist monasteries of the early

¹⁵⁴ Geoffrey Samuel, "Ritual Technologies and the State: The Mandala-Form Buddhist Temples of Bangladesh," *The Journal of Bengal Art*, Vol. 7 (2002): 39–56.

¹⁵⁵ A.J. Gail, "On the Maṇḍalaic Structure of the Paharpur Temple," *Journal of Bengal Art*, Vol. 4, 1999, pp. 131-139.

¹⁵⁶ Debala Mitra, *Buddhist Monuments*, Calcutta: Punthi Pustak, 1971 (reprint), p. 242.

¹⁵⁷ K.N. Dikshit, *Excavation at Paharpur, Bengal: Memoirs of Archaeological Survey of India*, Delhi: ASI, 1938, p. 38.

¹⁵⁸ Claudine Bautze-Picron, "From God to Demon, From Demon to God: Brahma and Other Hindu Deities in Late Buddhist Art of Eastern India," *Journal of Bengal Art*, Vol. 1, 1996, p. 109.

medieval Magadha induced a mandalaic appropriation of Brahmanical cults.¹⁵⁹ These Brahmanical deities appeared as the laukika deities in the maṇḍalas of the Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa indicating to their esoteric nature. The terracotta figures of the Nandadīrghī Vihāra of Jagajjivanpur also included several apotropaic and astral deities like Śiva, Agni, Varuṇa, Rāhu, Ketu, Śaṇi, Mīna, Karkaṭa and Vṛścika who were protecting the monastery as the guarding rakṣā deities.¹⁶⁰

Caryā or Yoga Tantra based landscape of Buddhist *vihāras* is noticed in the Buddhist architecture Udaygiri, Ratnagiri and Lalitgiri, as discussed by Umakant Mishra.¹⁶¹ By suggesting that these were maṇḍalavihāra, he argued that the insertion of dharma cetiya such as pratitya-samutpādadhāraṇī and vimaloṣṇīśadhāraṇī is the typical feature of this tantric landscape. From the 7th century CE onwards, these dhāraṇis substituted the body relic and became the symbol of Tathāgata centering on which a stūpa can be made.¹⁶² Atīśa Dīpaṅkar, in his *Vimaloṣṇīśadhāraṇīvidhi* stated that this dhāraṇī saves people from disaster and evils.¹⁶³ The rituals associated with this dhāraṇī involves making a square maṇḍala and scattering sandalwood, saffron or flowers. The small caityas are to be placed on the banquet of the maṇḍala and five kinds of offerings are placed on each caitya. The detailed description of the subsequent tantric rituals has been described by Atīśa Dīpaṅkar. K.N. Dikshit has reported two sealings during Paharpur excavation found inside a terracotta plaque from the core of the stūpa.¹⁶⁴ The two sealings bear Buddhist formula on them which is also found from Nālandā and Bodh Gaya. The sealings read:

*Omtrāyadhvāṃ sarvva-tathāgata hṛdaya-guhāṃjvalā dharma ḍḍha-guhāmsamhāra ayum
samsodhaya pāpam om sarva-tathāgata-samant-oshnishāṃ vimalavisuddhasvahā.*

¹⁵⁹ B.N. Prasad, “Cultic Relationship between Buddhism and Brahmanism in the ‘Last Stronghold’ of Indian Buddhism: An Analysis with Particular Reference to Votive Inscriptions on the Brahmanical Sculptures Donated to Buddhist Religious Centers in Early Medieval Magadha,” in *Buddhist Studies Review*, Vol. 30.2. 2013, pp. 181-199.

¹⁶⁰ Nicolas Morrissey, “Apotropaic Power and Ritual Efficacy in the Buddhist Art of Medieval Bengal: Observations on the Terracotta Sculptures of Nandadīrghī Vihāra,” in Abhisek S. Amar et al. (eds), *On the Regional Development of Early Medieval Buddhist Monasteries in South Asia*, Kyoto: CSAS, Ryukoku University, 2021, pp. 180-183.

¹⁶¹ Umakant Mishra, “Continuity and Change in the Sacred Landscape”, p. 231.

¹⁶² Ibid, p. 245.

¹⁶³ Mochizuki Kaie, “Five Remaining Works on the Esoteric Ritual of Dipaṅkaraśrījñāna”, p. 156.

¹⁶⁴ K.N. Dikshit, *Excavation at Paharpur*, p. 84.

Schopen has argued that this might be a protective formula which has been found in Gilgit also on a birch bark stripe.¹⁶⁵ He is also of opinion that this formula was taken from a single work. This formula might be the excerpt of a dhāraṇī which is referred to in a Tibetan Kanjur text, the Sanskrit title of which is *Sarvaprajñāntapāramitāsiddhacaitya-nāma-dhāraṇī*.¹⁶⁶ Schopen however has raised his objection to characterize these dhāraṇīs as tantric and rather emphasized on their Mahāyānic nature. Dhāraṇī stone plaques bearing the Vajradhātu maṇḍala of *Sarvatathāgatattvasaṃgraha* was also found the chamber of the Abhayagiri stūpa at Anuradhapura, Sri Lanka.¹⁶⁷ The text, a seminal work of Yoga Tantra class, was probably composed in south India in the mid-7th century and was well known in eastern India as Buddhaguhya wrote an excellent commentary on it during the Pāla king Dharmapāla.¹⁶⁸ All the maṇḍalas described in the text is the variations of the text's central maṇḍala – Vajradhātu mahāmaṇḍala described in the first chapter. This maṇḍala has placed Vairocana in the centre, Akṣobhya in the east, Ratnasambhava in the south Amitābha in the west and Amoghasiddhi in the north.¹⁶⁹

Conclusion

The overall religious culture reflected in the vihāras and the landgrant inscriptions in early medieval Bengal do not reflect any direct connection with the rise of Buddhist tantra. The descriptions of Xuanzang and Yijing regarding the monastic culture of the Buddhist vihāras in the 7th century CE also do not portray much deviation from the Vinaya rule. It is also difficult to tease out the evidence for the rise of tantra or the practice of tantra within the monastic orders from the associated epigraphic data, wherever available. We have made an attempt here to look for newer avenues of research, going beyond these major categories of sources which dominate historical research. Taking into account the subtler clues to the nuances of the history of Buddhism in our context., we find that the Buddhist religious edifices in early medieval Bengal reveal certain late

¹⁶⁵ Gregory Schopen, “The *Bodhigarbhālankāralakṣa* and *Vimaloṣṇīṣa Dhāraṇīs* in Indian Inscriptions: Two Sources for the Practice of Buddhism in Medieval India”, in *Figments and Fragments of Mahayana Buddhism in India: More Collected Papers*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2005, p. 332

¹⁶⁶ Ibid, p. 333

¹⁶⁷ Powell, *Rituals and Ruins*, p. 4

¹⁶⁸ Do-Kyun Kwon, *Sarva Tathāgata Tattva Saṃgraha: Compendium of All the Tathāgatas; A Study of Its Origin Structure and Teachings*, Unpublished PhD Thesis, SOAS, University of London, 2002, pp. 18-27.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid, pp. 41-50.

architectural and sculptural characteristics like maṇḍala-shaped ground plan which indicates that a few tantric features were gradually becoming apparent in the architecture of the regional Buddhist vihāras. The art associated with the vihāras was also characterized by the figures of the astral and apotropaic deities which may have been connected to the initiation of a tantric turn in the sacred space of the vihāra. The protective graha and dikpāla figures installed in the sacred edifices of Paharpur, Mainamati, Vikramśīla, and Jagajjivanpur indicate such initiation of the tantra ideals. The dhāraṇī inscriptions found on stone and terracotta tablets might also indicate the turn toward Buddhist tantra. Whether the installation of such features was an indication of the social anxiety and tension of the contemporary regional monastic community cannot be ascertained but the questions remain palpable.

The next step is to search within the academic culture of the Buddhist vihāras of the region under consideration to find whether we can trace the initiation and proliferation of the tantra trend. The phenomenon becomes especially evident from the proliferation of commentaries and exegetical texts on tantra compositions authored by monastic scholars like Padmasambhava, Śāntarakṣita, Abhayākaragupta and Atīśa Dīpaṅkar. The monastic complexes therefore seem to have been a major space in the orbit within which ritual practices and idealistic orientations toward tantra became gradually manifest. The literary tradition nurtured within the established Buddhist orbits becomes crucial in locating the rise of tantra orientations within the regional Buddhist ideology and ritual world. Indeed, a deep study of this textual culture is essential to grasp the history of the origin and evolution of Buddhist tantra in Bengal. The next chapter, devoted to the study of a few tantric Buddhist texts of early medieval Bengal, attempts to grasp at the roots and the routes through which tantrism emerged within Buddhism.

CHAPTER THREE

Textual Tradition: Understanding the trends of Tantrism in Buddhism

The present chapter attempts to understand the complex tradition of Buddhist tantrism and its origin by studying select tantric Buddhist texts which may be connected to the region. These include the *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa*, the *Tārāmūlakalpa*, the *Niṣpannayogāvalī*, the *Sādhanamālā*, and the *Caryāpada*. We shall also look into the earlier literature like the *Prajñāpāramitā*, the *Guhyasamājatantra* and the *Hevajratantra* to trace the origin of Buddhist tantra. The first series of texts, though commonly perceived as bearing the characteristics of tantrism, possess complex characters and cannot be held as oriented to the same genre of esoterism. We shall also try to briefly review the tradition of transmission of some of these texts within the greater Buddhist orbit of Tibet, Nepal and Southeast Asia.

3.1 Categorizing the early medieval Buddhist texts of Bengal

Scholars have contended that the Sanskrit Buddhist texts from the 7th century CE onwards provide the most comprehensive ground in the study of Buddhist tantrism.¹ The authors, compilers and the redactors of the texts of Buddhist tantra followed the tradition of ascribing the contents of these works to the historical Buddha.² Isaacson had argued that the Buddhist tantra texts and their mss were being transmitted for centuries from India to Tibet and vice-versa. Each of the early texts created a long tradition of embedded teaching by generating their commentaries, and abundant exegetical literature. Multiple traditions and theological ideas had emerged in the course of such transmissions of texts through centuries. The texts reflect the evolution and modifications within Buddhist tantra which evolved over long time, giving rise to a heterogeneous conglomeration of different ritual traditions and cults. Therefore, the Buddhist tantra texts of early medieval India present complex strands of philosophy and ritual practices which underwent interactions and reciprocations with varied branches of tantra within and beyond Buddhism.

¹ Harunaga Isaacson, *Tantric Buddhism in India (From c. AD 800 to c. AD 1200)*, p. 1, accessed from <https://www.buddhismuskunde.uni-hamburg.de/pdf/4-publikationen/buddhismus-in-geschichte-und-gegenwart/bd2-k02isaacson.pdf> on 7th February, 2024 at 7 pm.

² Ibid, p. 2.

To begin with we shall discuss the Tibetan tradition of categorization of the Indian tantra texts. The Buddhist texts of tantric orientation and Indian origin are mostly known from the Tibetan canon. The first phase of Tibetan Buddhist textual tradition, the phase of the *rNyng ma* (Ancient Tantra) or the ancient school, extended from the 7th to mid-9th centuries. The Buddhist literary tradition of this phase in Tibet was divided by Orna Almogi into three distinctive periods: Indic, hybrid Indic-Tibetic and Tibetic.³ The transmission of scriptures and treatises began from this first phase. The ancient tantra texts of Indic origin recorded in the Tibetan tradition included esoteric Indian scriptures in Tibetan translation. Their number is quite small. These are included in the *bka-gyur* edition. They have been divided into four classes of Tantra like *Kriyā*, *caryā*, *yoga* and *anuttarayoga*.⁴ The Kriyā class is by far the largest one with over 450 works assigned to the Kanjur catalogue including the *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa* and the *Tārāmūlakalpa*. They form a miscellaneous collection of largely magical texts containing an array of rituals designed to achieve a variety of worldly (*laukika*) goals. In contrast to the Kriyā, very few texts are standardly assigned to the Caryā Tantra class. The most important Caryā text is the *Mahāvairocana Sūtra*, also known as the *Mahāvairocanābhisambodhi Sūtra*, which was probably composed during the early to mid-seventh century.⁵ A significant feature of the Caryā tantras is the place accorded to the Vairocana Buddha. The key text in this class of yoga tantra is the *Tattvasaṃgraha Sūtra*, also known as the *Sarvatathāgatattvasaṃgraha Sūtra*. Other works in this category include the *Sarvadūrgatipariśodhana*, the *Sarvarahasya*, the *Vajraśekhara Tantra*, and the short but influential *Nāmasaṃgīti*. In the anuttarayoga tantra or yoginī tantra, the employment of sexual and transgressive elements formed a major part. What is distinctive about the Yoginī class is its incorporation of symbolism, deities, and practices associated with cremation grounds.⁶ The important text under the anuttara class were the *Hevajra tantra*, the *Cakrasaṃvara tantra* and the *Laghusaṃvara tantra*. Among the texts selected for the present study we can locate a few of these genres. We shall discuss these features in the respective sections.

³ Orna Almogi, “The Human Behind the Divine: Some Reflection on the Scriptural Evolution of the Ancient Tantras (*rNyng rgyud*),” in Volker Caumanns et. al. (eds), *Unearthing Himalayan Treasure: Festschrift for Franz-Karl Ehrhard*, Marburg: Indica et Tibetica Verlag, pp. 13 – 21.

⁴ Paulo William and Anthony Tribe, *Buddhist Thought: A Complete Introduction to the Indian Tradition*, London: Routledge, 2000, p. 203.

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 207.

⁶ *Ibid*, p. 214.

In the context of early medieval Bengal, the Buddhist tantra texts can be put under a different mode of categorization of the textual genres, like doctrinal, exegetical, hagiographic, ritual and prescriptive, anthological etc. The texts that the present research proposes to examine are of different categories like ritual compendium (*Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa* and *Tārāmūlakalpa*), prescriptive (*Niṣpaṇṇayogāvalī*) and anthology (*Sādhanamālā* and *Caryāpada*). However, despite being in the same category the *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa* and the *Tārāmūlakalpa* exhibit significant difference with regard to their description of ritual performance and the political events. While the former devoted a large number of the stanzas to describing the political situation in Gauḍa, the latter is silent about such matters.

Buddhist anthological tradition became a distinctive literary trend in early medieval Bengal from 11th century CE onwards.⁷ Beyond the Buddhist anthologies, we come across a wide range of other anthologies during the same period. For example, the *Kavīndravacanasamuccaya* and the *Subhāṣitaratnaḥkoṣa* of Vidyākara may be located in Bengal, particularly in the Jagaddala Vihāra of Varendra region during the Pāla rule.⁸ The latter text comprised of 525 verses composed by 111 poets among whom we have the celebrated Buddhist composers like Buddhakaragupta and Ratnakīrti.⁹ Besides this, we also have the *Saduktikarṇāmṛita* (13th century CE) of Śrīdharaḍāsa, a well-known anthology from Bengal.¹⁰ However, Sanskrit was not the only language in which the verses included in these anthologies were composed. The *Caryāpada* is an excellent example. This tradition of anthology left its imprint beyond the cultural – spiritual range produced in Sanskrit language and became an important spiritual as well as vernacular literary tradition. The intellectual and social drive behind the compositions of the siddhācāryas, revered for their poetic merit and spiritual message well as the background to the compilation of such creations deserve comprehensive analysis. The phenomenon has caught attention of many eminent scholars who have tried to discuss the caryās from philosophical, literary, and mystical perspectives. For our

⁷ Ludwik Sternbach, *Subhāṣita, Gnostic, and Didactic Literature, A History of Indian Literature*, Vol. IV, Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1974, pp. 1-3.

⁸ D.D. Kosambi, ‘Introducing Vidyākara’s *Subhāṣitaratnaḥkoṣa*’, in B. D. Chattopadhyay (ed.), *D.D. Kosambi: Combined Methods in Indology and Other Writings*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005, pp. 721–49.

⁹ Nupur Dasgupta, “Sanskrit Literature and Technical Treatises,” in Abdul M. Chowdhury and Ranabir Chakravarti (eds), *History of Bangladesh: Bengal in Regional Perspective*, Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 2018, p. 565.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 564.

current concern, we shall mainly trace the essential characteristics that the compositions in the compilation bear toward the understanding of the distinct strand of tantra that they represent. This would help our perusal of the varied trajectories of development and manifestation of the tantra genre of Buddhism in the given context.

3.2 General problem of the authorship of the early medieval Buddhist texts in the light of Tibetan textual Corpus

The question of age, authorship and authenticity of the early medieval Indian Buddhist texts is complicated by the conflict and confusion of traditions, both Indian and Tibetan. The trace of the place of origin of the authors and their activity was obliterated by the insufficient and obscure description in the texts themselves. Nevertheless, based on the occasional mention about the authors and their place of origin in Tibetan source we can situate a few of them reasonably in Bengal. For example, the famous tantra writer of Nālandā - Śāntideva is mentioned in the Tibetan source as a resident of Zahor which has been identified with Jessore by many scholars.¹¹ It is believed that many of the tantra authors were the residents of the east Indian Buddhist monasteries like – Nālandā, Vikramśīla, Sompura, Odantapuri etc which has been already discussed in second chapter. There is also possibility that the writers of the vernacular literature might belong to a sphere beyond the monastic fold of Buddhism.

The problem of age and authorship of the early medieval Buddhist texts lies in the very process of translation and transmission of the Tibetan corpus from Sanskrit. To discuss the peculiar characteristics of the transmission process we may look at the *gter ma* or the Treasure texts which are also considered to be buddhavachana or the words of Buddha.¹² The Treasures are believed to be the mystical revelation by Padmasambhava, the resident monk of Nālandā, who played a leading role in preaching Buddhism in Tibet in 8th century CE. This corpus is comprised of a root text along with commentaries, sādhanās, rituals and a historical section describing the origin of the textual rituals, its discoverer and his biography. The historical section gives a glimpse of the

¹¹ Nupur Dasgupta, “Sanskrit Literature and Technical Treatises,” p. 547.

¹² Janet Gyatso, “Signs, Memory and History: A Tantric Buddhist Theory of Scriptural Transmission,” in *The Journal of the International Association of the Buddhist Studies*, Vo. 9, No. 2, 1986, pp. 1-4.

process of scripture transmission which has three phases.¹³ The first phase of transmission consists of the teaching of the primordial Buddha or Ādi Buddha like Sāmantabhadra. The second phase or the symbolic transmission is attributed to the earliest teachers and students of the *rNying ma* school who were closely associated with late Indian Buddhist tantra. The third phase or the ear transmission is the verbal conveyance of the texts which Padmasambhava disseminated to king Khri srong Ide bstan. Here, in all the three phases of the transmission, memory plays the most decisive role in maintaining historical authenticity of the scripture.¹⁴ The personal memory of the receiver of the teachings therefore was an important factor to retain the originality of the texts as well as their authors.

The translation of the Sanskrit Buddhist texts was another important medium of transmission of the Buddhism in Tibet. A large number of Sanskrit manuscripts were imported from India to Tibet during 8th to 12th centuries. But the process of translating this huge number of manuscripts was not completely free of error. Wedemeyer has pointed out a few basic grounds where the translation lost its precision, like multiple manuscripts of a single text and inadequate knowledge of Sanskrit grammar and idioms.¹⁵ The seeming uniformity in the *Bka gyur* and *Bstan gyur* was due to the emergence of a standard process of compiling the revelation. The process of assembling of the Tibetan translation under two Tibetan catalogues began at a much later period, i.e. mid-14th century. So, we can assume that a lot of original translations representing variety of Indian traditions were transformed and remodeled for this process. The authenticity of the esoteric scriptures in Tibet was determined by the source of the scriptures - whether these texts produced by Indians or by Tibetans. The former was considered to be authentic and the latter inauthentic.¹⁶ In Tibet, legitimation from an Indian paṇḍit is considered to be a highest marker of authenticity. The Indian scholars, who were invited to Tibet to resolve a dispute about a text, generally taught

¹³ Gyatso, “Signs, Memory and History”, p. 8.

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 11.

¹⁵ Christian K Wedemeyer, “Tantalizing Traces of the Labours of the Lotsāwas: Alternative Translation of the Sanskrit Sources in the Writings of Rje Tsong Kha Pa,” in Ronald M Davidson and Christian K Wedemeyer (eds), *Tibetan Buddhist Literature and Praxis: Studies in its Formative Period, 900-1400*, Boston: Brill, 2006, p. 151-53

¹⁶ Ronald M Davidson, “Gsar ma Apocrypha: The Creation of Orthodoxy, Grey Texts, and the New Revelation,” in Helmut Eimar and David Germano (eds), *The Many Canons of Tibetan Buddhism*, Boston: Brill, 2002, p. 203

the text to the translator. As the Buddhist esoteric texts were commented upon by a number of Indian scholars, wide variety of a single text was in circulation in Tibet. In the process of the formation of the canon, a particular translations became normative and commented upon by Tibetan scholars.¹⁷

The authenticity of a particular text was sometimes determined by its derivation from a root text. A lot of the texts from *bka gyur* canon have validated their authenticity by claiming origin from the *Śatasaharikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra*¹⁸ which will be discussed with details in the subsequent section of this chapter. By the 11th century the Indian scholars adopted the strategy to claim the traditional origin from a massive root text to prove the authenticity of any tantra text that they were commenting upon. The tantra writers of Buddhism continued to legitimize their theological ideas by invoking the massive texts. According to David Grey, this was a central strategy of an author to legitimize the authority of the particular text.¹⁹

3.3 Tracing the early medieval Buddhist manuscripts in Southeast Asia and Nepal

We have already discussed the cross-cultural aspect of early medieval Buddhism in Bengal in the first chapter. The eastern India was an integral part of a greater orbit of Buddhism that connected Bengal with a vast region like Myanmar, Arakan, Siam, Java in the Southeast and Nepal, Tibet and Himalayan belt in the north and Northwest. The arterial corridors and sea routes, facilitated the transmission of the Buddhist texts, images, and rituals. The manuscript remnant of the 11th century Buddhist commentarial literature like *Durbodhāloka* discovered from the medieval Siam and Cambodia bear the testimony of the geographical intertextuality between Bengal and Southeast Asia.²⁰ Peter Skilling has pointed out in his recent studies that the *Durbodhāloka*, composed by Dharmakīrti in Suvarnadvīpa, was the commentary of *Abhisamayālamkāra* – a defining text of Buddhism in the Pāla regime. Furthermore, the translation of the same text in Tibetan by the Bengali scholar Atīśa showed that the 11th century Malay Peninsula and Khmer land formed an intellectual and ritual network with Pāla Bengal and Tibet.

¹⁷ Davidson, “Gsar ma Apocrypha”, p. 205

¹⁸ David Gray, “On the Very Idea of a Tantric Canon, Myth, Politics and the Formation of the Bka Gyur”, in *Journal of the International Association of Tibetan Studies*, Issue 5, December, 2009, p. 4

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 14

²⁰ Peter Skilling, “Geographies of Intertextualities: Buddhist Literature in Pre-modern Siam,” in *Aseanie*, Vol. 19, 2007, p. 91-94.

The network of textual transmission also included the Tai Buddhist scholars engaged in the indefatigable translation of the ritual, ethical and cosmological texts of India. The language of the textual body was mostly Sanskrit and the script was regional vernacular script like Khom and Tham script. Skilling has argued that these inter-regional relations were “dialogic”, as it was not monodirectional from India to South-east Asia. Rather, it was multidirectional as both Indian and Southeast Asian monks travelled to China, Tibet and Nepal and engaged in the intellectual exchanges.²¹

Nepal too, from the 10th century onwards became a hub of the Buddhist manuscript production. The basic characteristic of Newari Buddhism has always been Indic. The esoteric tradition was conveyed to Tibet via Nepal.²² The Newari Buddhism in the medieval period showed similarities with the esoteric Buddhism of Tibet. The esoteric element in the Newari Buddhism included tantric initiation rituals dedicated to the tantra deities like Saṃvara and Hevajra under the guidance of a Vajrācārya or spiritual master. The Sanskrit texts, icons and rituals used by the Vajrācārya of Kathmandu valley for the past thousand years seem to have deeply influenced by the Pāla period Buddhism of Northern and Eastern India. A lot of tantra manuscripts and traditions were transported to the Kathmandu Valley after the Muslim conquest of the Gangetic plains.²³ The major focus of the Newari Buddhist saṃgha turned towards preserving and copying of manuscript. Thus, Nepal became a center of copying Buddhist manuscripts. To access the copy of these manuscripts one had to be initiated under tantra method. Among the copied manuscripts we may refer to the proto-tantric Mahāyāna sutra like the *Gaṇḍavyūha* and the *Samādhirājā* as well as tantra text like the *Guhyasamājatantra*.

The collection and publication of the Newari manuscripts to the modern academia can be credited to the fieldwork of Brian Hodgson who collected 86 bundles of 170 separate works on various subjects. These manuscripts contained the works of history, philosophy and rituals of Buddhism. While editing this magnitude of Nepali literature, R.L. Mitra noted that the manuscripts mostly contained the Mahāyāna sutra and Avadāna literature.²⁴ There was also a large section of

²¹ Skilling, “Geographies of Intertextualities”, p. 98

²² Todd T. Lewis, *Popular Buddhist Texts from Nepal: Narratives and Rituals of Newar Buddhism*, New York: State University of New York, 2000, p. 13.

²³ Lewis, *Popular Buddhist Texts from Nepal*, p. 15.

²⁴ Rajendralal Mitra, *Sanskrit Buddhist Literature of Nepal*, Calcutta: Baptist Mission Press, 1882, p. xl.

dhāraṇī literature like the *Aparimitāyūr dhāraṇī*, the *Māricīnāmadhāraṇī* and the *Dhāraṇī-mantra-saṃgraha* bearing no author name. The dhāraṇī literature invoked the Buddhist deities like Tārā, Vajrasattva and Avalokiteśvara which was obviously of later date. The texts of tantra orientation in the rakṣā genre like the *Mahāsivatātī*, the *Mahārakṣāmantrāṇusārīni*, the *Mahāpratisarākalpa*, the *Mahākāla-tantra* and the *Mahāmāyūrī* formed a significant body of the manuscript corpus. R.L. Mitra has identified the Abhidhānottara manuscript as a treaty of the tantra class containing mystic mantra and direction of the demi-gods.²⁵ The most significant discovery of the Buddhist tantra manuscript of early medieval Bengal is the discovery of the *Caryāpada* from the Durbar Library of Nepal by Haraprasad Sastri. Composed in proto-Bengal vernacular language, this manuscript sheds light on the later tradition of Buddhist tantra in Bengal. The Cācā or Caryā song, an embodiment of the realized state of a practitioner, is still an important part of the tantra performance and rituals of Newari Buddhism.²⁶

The Newari tradition also yielded the manuscripts of the tantra texts like Śrīcakrasaṃvarasādhana²⁷ and Dākārṇava²⁸ which were connected to the Buddhist tantra traditions of early medieval Bengal. Sugiki recovered a manuscript of the former from the National Library of Kathmandu, while the manuscript of the latter was discovered by H.P. Sastri from the Durbar library. The Śrīcakrasaṃvarasādhana was a part of the Cakrasaṃvara tradition which was commented upon by the east Indian Buddhist siddhācāryas like Luipā and Ghaṇṭāpā. Similarly, the Vajradākatantra and the Dākārṇava were also compiled in eastern part of the Indian subcontinent between late 10th century to early 12th century as argued by Sugiki.²⁹ The chief deity of the Dākārṇava was Vajradāka who was similar to Hevajra, Heruka, Cakrasaṃvara and Candramahorṣana whose ceremonial cult gained coinage in Nepal during medieval period. Nepal as a corridor between India and Tibet can be further delineated by the itinerary of Atīśa who halted

²⁵ Mitra, *Sanskrit Buddhist Literature of Nepal*, p. 1.

²⁶ Shanker Thapa, “Cācā Songs and Newar Buddhists: Ritual Singing of Vajrayāna Buddhism in Nepal,” in Andrea Losseries (ed), *Sahaja: The Role of Dohā and Caryagītī in the Cultural Indo-Tibetan Interface*, New Delhi: Buddhist World Press, 2015, p. 4.

²⁷ Tsunehiko Sugiki, “Kṛshnacārya’s Sricakrasaṃvarasādhana: Critical Edition with Notes,” in *Chisan-Kangaku-Kai, NII-Electronic Library Service*, p. 45.

²⁸ Tsunehiko Sugiki, “The Sādhana of the Adamantine Body Maṇḍala: A Critical Edition and Translation of the Sanskrit Dākārṇava,” in *Chisan-Kangaku-Kai, NII-Electronic Library Service*, p. 45.

²⁹ *Ibid*, p. 46.

in Nepal on his way to western Tibet from Vikramśīla.³⁰ He also founded Tham Vihara in 1040 CE to commemorate the Vikramśīla vihāra. The surviving Buddhist culture of Nepal with strong similarity to Tibetan Buddhism may give us a perfect glimpse, through its manuscript remains, how the Buddhism in early medieval Bengal was being shaped by the cultural exchanges.

3.4 The earliest textual specimen of Buddhist tantrism

The origins of tantra elements in Buddhism remain a subject of significant debate. The main point of contention has been the identification of specific ritualistic practices as defining features of tantrism. Given Buddhist tantra's numerous subdivisions, ritualistic diversity, varied practices, and complex philosophical perspectives, historians face considerable challenges in establishing its chronological and ideological boundaries. If we consider mantra and dhāraṇī to be representative of early tantra features in Buddhism, then the *Prajñāpāramitā* texts from the 1st century BCE could be seen as the incipient stage of tantrism in Buddhism. This text's significance is highlighted by its numerous reproductions in condensed form and its personification as a goddess. Some scholars trace the origins of the *Prajñāpāramitā* to the Buddhist tradition of the 3rd century BCE, noting its focus on *prajñā* (wisdom) in mnemonic lists used to memorize Buddha's teachings.³¹ James Apple posits that Buddhist discourse, subjected to analytical scrutiny, evolved into Abhidharma literature and the *Prajñāpāramitā*. He suggests that the *Prajñāpāramitā* practices may trace back to mendicants like Subhuti, who lived simply and avoided conceptual determinations.³² An early manuscript of this text, closely resembling Lokaksema's translation, was discovered in the Gāndhārī language and Kharoṣṭhī script, dating from the latter half of the 1st century CE. The original reviewers of this manuscript believed it was a copy of an earlier, undated version.³³ Edward Conze argues that the *Prajñāpāramitā* originated among the monastic communities of mahāsaṃghika in Andhra deśa. According to Conze, this tradition likely migrated northward due to historical or climatic changes, where the text continued to be preserved.³⁴ After

³⁰ David Snellgrove, *Indo-Tibetan Buddhism, Indian Buddhist and their Tibetan Successor*, Boston, Sambhala, 2002, p. 377.

³¹ James B. Apple, 'Prajñāpāramitā', K.T.S. Sarao, Jeffery D. Long (eds), *Buddhism and Jainism*, under the Series: Encyclopedia of Indian Religions, Netherlands: Springer, 2017, pp.925–32.

³² *Ibid*, p. 926.

³³ Harry Falk and Seishi Karashima, 'A First-century Prajñāpāramitā Manuscript from Gandhara – Parivarta 1 (Text from the Split Collection 1)', p. 19.

³⁴ Edward Conze, *The Prajñāpāramitā Literature*, Tokyo: The Reiyukai, 1978, p. 4.

moving to the northwestern regions, the text was initially transmitted orally in Prakrit and later, around the beginning of the Common Era, was transcribed into Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit.

Conze identified four distinct phases in the development of *Prajñāpāramitā* literature: a) the expansion of the foundational text (100 BCE – 100 CE), b) its further elaboration (100 CE – 300 CE), c) the restatement of its doctrines in brief sutras and versified summaries, and d) the period of tantra influence and integration into magical practices (600–1200 CE).³⁵ During the final phase, starting around 600 CE, the *Prajñāpāramitā* sutras were increasingly used for invoking mystical powers, and civil authorities employed them for ritual magic, such as rainmaking and pest control. The *Prajñāpāramitā* is represented through various bija mantras in tantra texts like the *Sādhanamālā*.³⁶ Conze noted several versions of the *Prajñāpāramitā* composed between 600 and 1200 CE, which often aimed to condense and simplify the original text. One such work, 'Perfection of Wisdom in a Few Words,' was tailored for those considered less capable, less meritorious, or less intellectually adept. Additionally, ten other *Prajñāpāramitā* texts were discovered in the Tibetan Kanjur. By 400 CE, the text began to be personified as a deity and was featured in the *Sādhanamālā* (11th century CE), which provided details on its iconography and worship practices.

The early Mahāyāna Sūtras, particularly those in the "rakṣā" genre, are believed to have contained the early elements of Buddhist tantra. These texts, such as the Manasvi-nāgarāja-sūtra, Mahāmāyūrī-Vidyārājñī-Sūtra, and Pañcarakṣā-Sūtra, were created by Buddhist monks to protect against dangers like snakebites and natural disasters, especially in the challenging environments of the Northwestern subcontinent.³⁷ These scriptures, believed to be revealed by the Buddha, were highly revered and used for protection in various contexts. For instance, the Mahāmāyūrī-Vidyārājñī-Sūtra was used to protect against threats like robbers, fire, and disease, with a specific

³⁵ Conze, *The Prajñāpāramitā Literature*, p. 1.

³⁶ Bhattacharyya, *The Sādhanamālā*, Vol. II, pp. 310–11.

³⁷ For details of these sūtras see, A.F. Rudolf Hornel (ed), *The Bower Manuscript: Fascimile Leaves, Nagari Transcripts, Romanised Transliteration, and English Transliteration with Notes*, Vol. I-VII, Calcutta: Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing, 1897. Ingo Strauch, "The evolution of the Buddhist rakṣā genre in the Light of New Evidence from Gāndhāra: The Manasvi-nāgarāja-sūtra from the Bajaur collection of Kharoṣṭhī Manuscripts," in *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London*, Vol. 77, No. 1, p. 69.

focus on preventing snakebites, given the peacock's symbolic connection to this danger. In China, this text also became associated with securing political power.³⁸

The Pañcarakṣā-Sūtra, prevalent in regions like Bengal and among Newari Buddhists, invoked protective deities to guard against disease, evil spirits, and disasters.³⁹ Specific deities like Mahāmāyūrī and Mahāsītāvatī were associated with protection from snakebites and smallpox, respectively. These texts were translated and spread across China, Central Asia, and Southeast Asia, with numerous manuscripts found in early medieval Bengal. The protective nature of these dhāraṇīs (chants or spells) made them integral to both monastic and lay Buddhist practices.

Another text considered by some historians to be central to Buddhist tantra is the *Guhyasamājatantra*, datable to the 5th to the 6th centuries CE.⁴⁰ Alex Wayman categorizes the *Guhyasamājatantra* into two main groups: the revealed text found in the Tibetan Kanjur and the exegetical literature within the Tibetan Tanjur.⁴¹ Among the key revealed works listed in the Kanjur are the *Guhyasamājamūlatantra*, the *Guhyasamājauttaratantra*, and the *Guhyasamājavyākhyātantra*, which cover only specific chapters of the main Sanskrit text. This text, revealed by Bodhisattva Vajradharma to Indrabhūti, the king of Uḍḍiyāna, introduced a new approach to salvation by focusing on the 'satisfaction of all desires' as central to achieving enlightenment.⁴² As a Yoga Tantra text, the *Guhyasamājatantra* also addresses Prajñāviṣeka in its 18th chapter, which involves a form of initiation including sexual union with Prajñā or Śakti under the guidance of a teacher.⁴³ There is a noticeable connection between the *Guhyasamājatantra* and the *Caryāpada* in their shared emphasis on the intrinsic nature of human beings as a path to realizing the truth. Similar to the kāyāsādhana (body practice) in *Caryāpada*, the *Guhyasamājatantra* introduces the concept of nirmāṇakāya, interpreting the body as a material form alongside speech and mind, which represent spiritual and absolute aspects (sambhoga and

³⁸ Charles D. Orzech, "Metaphor Translation and the Construction of Kingship in the Scripture for Human Kings and the Mahāmāyūrī-vidyārājñī-sūtra," in *Cahiers d'Extreme-Asie*, Vol. 13, pp. 55-83.

³⁹ S.K. Saraswati, *Pal Juger Chittrakala* (in Bengali), Kolkata: Ananda Publisher, 1978, pp. 37-54.

⁴⁰ Francesca Fremantle, 'A Critical Study of Guhyasamājatantra', unpublished PhD dissertation, London: University of London, 1971, p. 14.

⁴¹ Alex Wayman, *Yoga of the Guhyasamājatantra the Arcane Lore of Forty Verses: A Buddhist Tantra Commentary*, New York: Samuel Weiser Inc., 1980, p. 84.

⁴² Benoytosh Bhattacharyya (ed.), *Guhyasamāja Tantra or Tathagataguhyaka*, Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1967, p. 27.

⁴³ *Ibid*, p. xi.

Dharmakāyā).⁴⁴ Additionally, the *Guhyasamājatantra* is notable for being the first text to introduce the Pañca Tathāgata, or the five Dhyānī Buddhas (Amitābha, Akṣobhya, Vairocana, Ratnasambhava, Amoghasiddhi), along with their mantras, mandalas, and Śaktis.

The *Guhyasamājatantra* and many of its key ideas were later consolidated in a number of the Buddhist tantra texts with possible origin in eastern India. The heterodox sexual initiation process was further aggravated in the 8th century CE yoginī tantra texts like the *Hevajratantra* (late 8th century CE) and the *Cakrasamvaratantra* (8th century CE). David Grey has pointed out that the sixteen verse of the opening chapter of the *Cakrasamvaratantra* regarding the ritual consumption of sexual fluids has intertextuality related to a passage in the *Guhyasamājatantra*.⁴⁵ The extensive commentarial literature of the yoginī tantra texts like *Hevajratantra* and *Cakrasamvaratantra* can be attributed to the siddhācāryas of early medieval Bengal like Lui pā, Nāro pā and Saraha.⁴⁶ The tradition of the *Hevajratantra* even crossed the boundary of India and reached China during the 11th century after the Chinese master Fa-hu or Dharmapāla translated it into Chinese.⁴⁷ In the literary landscape of tantrism in early medieval Bengal, the precursory texts like the *Guhyasamājatantra* had a deep impact. The mandala rituals almost became ubiquitous in the tantra of yoginī class and kriya class (*Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa*). Moreover, the family of the Pañcatathāgata and their respective śāktis came to encompass a huge Buddhist pantheon, whose figures appeared prominently in the sculptural landscape of early medieval Bengal. In the following section we shall discuss the varied aspects of tantra element in Buddhism in early medieval Bengal in the light of a few tantra texts.

3.5 The *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa*

Among the Sanskrit Buddhist texts extant in this period the present research proposes to take up the *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa* as a primary source to analyse the emergence and development of tantra element in Buddhism in Bengal. The text is believed to be associated with Bengal by a lot of scholars. The composition of the text can be geographically situated in Gauḍa and Magadha

⁴⁴ Fremantle, *A Critical Study of Guhyasamājatantra*, p.15.

⁴⁵ David Grey, *The Cakrasamvara Tantra (The Discourse of Sri Heruka): A Study and Annotated Translation*, New York: American Institute of Buddhist Studies, 2007, p. 108.

⁴⁶ David Snellgrove, *The Hevajra Tantra: A Critical Study*, Part I, London: Oxford University Press, 1959, p. 12.

⁴⁷ Ch. Willems, *The Chinese Hevajratantra*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2004, p. 23.

region as the author pays great attention to these regions. In chapter 53 the author gives a historical account of the Nāgas (140 CE), the Guptas (350 CE) and the beginning of the Pāla period (750 CE) from the point of view of Gauḍa, thus showing his familiarity with Gauḍa and its proximity. The text mentions that the people of the eastern kingdoms like Pauṇḍra, Odra and Kāmaruḍa will be affected by an earthquake alongside making a political prediction that the king of Vaṅga will die.⁴⁸ It also predicts that the king of Gauḍa will be incapacitated due to its hostile engagement with other kingdoms.⁴⁹ It also mentions a city named Vardhamāna (bhukti?) where the king of Gauḍa named Loka was born who was also devoted to Buddhism.⁵⁰ The text extensively predicts the names and initials of the future king of Gauḍa, some of whom would be devoted to Buddhism and will sponsor the building of caityas and monasteries. Throughout its futuristic prediction about the kings of Gauḍa, the text portrays a picture of political instability before and after Śaśāṅka (Soma).⁵¹ Some of the Gauḍa kings ruled for a few days to a few weeks before being treacherously killed. This probably indicates the prevalence of mutual enmity between the powerful sections. The Sanskrit manuscript also mentions the name of Pāla king Mahīpāla on a few instances.⁵² However there are claims that the text perhaps originated in Sriparvata and Dhānyakataka in south India. Though, MacDonald has refuted this claim by pointing out that there are dozens of regions being mentioned as being conducive to successful practice of mantra.⁵³ These geographical provinces do not give preference to any one region and thus should not be assumed as any evidence of provenance. Glenn Wallis has argued that portions of this text may have originated in different places and eventually was formed into a whole.⁵⁴ The text bears the evidence of compilation of different writings of Mañjuśrī, including earlier sutra tradition or recent ritual tradition, leading to creation of mulakalpa of Mañjuśrī or the root text book of the rituals of Mañjuśrī.

The *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa* is an anonymous text gradually assumed the shape of a full text through the process of compilation and redaction. It is very difficult to determine its date as

⁴⁸ T. Ganapati Sastri (ed), *The Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa*, Part-I, Trivandrum: The Superintendent Government Press, 1920, 24.141

⁴⁹ *The Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa*, 24.142

⁵⁰ *The Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa*, 53.583

⁵¹ *The Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa*, 53.612-53.809.

⁵² *The Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa*, 15.56 and 24.100

⁵³ Glenn Wallis, *Meditating the Power of Buddhas: Rituals in the Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa*, New York: State University of New York Press, 2002, p. 11.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, p. 11.

Matsunaga argues that it was not composed with a single design from beginning to end as every chapter has varying dates of composition.⁵⁵ Przulski argues that the *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa* contains two primary historical strata – the older one commencing with chapter 4 and more recent one consisting of chapters 1-3 and 50-53. The chapter colophon of the *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa* chapter 1-3 read parivartah while those of 4 and on read paṭalavisārah. The former term being more recent points to a more recent addition, 11th century to be precise. He also argues that chapter 1-3 were being composed at a time when tantra elements were becoming more pronounced than the Mahāyāna vaipulya elements. That’s why the 11th century Tibetan translation of chapter 1-3 reads Tantra instead of vaipulya in chapter 4 and on. However, Wallis argues that as we can categorise the *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa* within the identical cultic pattern of Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava ritual text, we can safely date the *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa* between 7th to 9th centuries CE. The *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa* shows similar intention, function, style and structure as the Śaiva texts.⁵⁶

The earliest Sanskrit manuscript of the text was found in Manalikkara Mathom near Padmanabhapuram of the native state Travancore in 1909. This manuscript was edited and published by Mahamahopadhyaya T. Ganapati Sastri in three volumes; the first of which came up in 1920. It was a large palm-leaf manuscript containing about 13,000 granthas, written in Devnagari character. The manuscript was written by Paṇḍita Ravichandra, the head of the Mūlaghoṣa Vihāra who originally belonged to Madhyadeśa and migrated out from there.⁵⁷ At the end of the manuscript it is written, ‘here ends the kalpa of Ārya Mañjuśrī as is available’. As the manuscript is an incomplete one, the editor has assumed that the original manuscript from which the present was copied was also an incomplete one. However, there are at least seven manuscripts of the *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa* known to us at present as listed by Martin Delhey.⁵⁸

1. The palm-leaf MS from Trivandrum deposited in the Oriental Research Institute and Manuscript library in Thiruvananthapuram. This is written in early Devnagari and the scribe was Pandit Ravichandra of the Mulaghosavihara.

⁵⁵ Ibid, p. 9.

⁵⁶ Wallis, *Meditating the Power of Buddhas*, p. 10

⁵⁷ T. Ganapati Sastri (ed), *The Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa*, p. 1

⁵⁸ Martin Delhey, “The Textual Source of Mañjuśrīyamūlakalpa (Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa) with Special Reference to its Early Nepalese Witness, NGMPP, A39/4”, in *Journal of the Nepal Research Centre*, Vol. XIV, 2012, pp. 56-57

2. The second one is Tokyo University MS. Material is paper and script is Nepalese.
3. Palm-leaf MS from National Archives, Kathmandu. The script is Hooked Nepalese.
4. Bir 45. Material, number of folios and size not specified. Script is Devnagari.
5. Bir 157. Preserved in National Archives, Kathmandu. Script is latter Nepalese.
6. Palm-leaf MS of IASWR MBB-II-206.
7. MS preserved at the Chester Beatty Library in Dublin.

Based on these manuscripts Delhey has proposed to review a few remarks of Sastri about the text, its origin and the date of the oldest manuscript. He suggested that the Palaeographic feature of the Trivandrum manuscript indicates a much earlier date of production than what has been suggested by Sastri who placed it in 16th century. He suggested that the manuscript was produced in 11th century and was written in Nepal before being transported to south India because, the climatic condition of both north and south India is not conducive to the good preservation of a palm-leaf manuscripts.⁵⁹ He also assumed that as Ravichandra, the writer of the manuscript in question, moved out of Madhyadeśa or central India, the text must have been written there or on his way to south India. However, all of his presumptions may be challenged as there is no strong evidence to support his views.

The chapter colophons found in the Trivandrum manuscript of the *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa* render the texts a variety of names like Bodhisattvapiṭaka and Bodhisattvapaṭalāvisāra. We also find discrepancies in the classification of the text in the Sanskrit manuscript and its Tibetan counterpart. The former has classified the text as a kalpa (manual or rites) or kalparājā or mantratantra literature, whereas the Tibetan translation has placed the text under kangyur corpus and referred to it as a tantra literature. The colophons of Tibetan translations states that the translation was completed by the Indian preceptor and spiritual teacher Kumārakalasa and monk Śākya Lodro, probably in mid-11th century. The Tibetan translation seems to be incomplete as it omitted the chapters from 18 to 23 and from 39 to 49. Chapter 53 and 54 have been combined into a single chapter in Tibetan translation i.e. chapter 36. The term mantratantra has been used throughout the text and might mean mantra system or method.⁶⁰ The *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa* belongs to a distinctive genre of literature known as kalpa literature which derived from the root word *klp*

⁵⁹ Delhey, “The Textual Source of Mañjuśrīyamūlakalpa”, p. 58

⁶⁰ <https://read.84000.co/translation/toh543.html>, accessed on 5th July, 2022 at 1:15 pm

meaning to be well ordered or regulated. Jan Gonda points out that the Kalpa as used by the Vedic Communities stood for instruction to be studied to understand the Vedic texts and to perform the rites.⁶¹ To him the kalpasūtra is a comprehensive term for various ceremonial rites or didactic manuals for ritual practice. Thus, we can say that the *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa* is a manual of ritual practice under the Buddhist tantra. The principal of this practice is the assumption of the persistence of Buddha's power in the world. The aim of the practice is to enable the practitioner to meditate Buddha's power and manipulate it for particular purpose.

The rituals of *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa* are revealed in a dialogical form between Buddha Śākyamuni and Mañjuśrī. The revelation occurs in the dual manner where Mañjuśrī also communicates to Buddha Śākyamuni about the performance of rituals. The teaching takes place in the śuddhāvāsopari or above the pure abode and the audience comprises all the Buddhist deities, the deified saints who once lived on earth and the most prominent divine and semi-divine beings. Throughout the initiation process described in the first chapter we can see both Buddha Śākyamuni and Mañjuśrī are entering in different kinds of meditational equilibrium known as Samādhi and from there an array of light coming out of their forehead and naval to enlighten the assembled distinguished listeners. The Samadhi plays a pivotal role in realizing the supreme truth and communicating the mantra and rituals to the assembled audience. In the beginning of the text the Buddha Śākyamuni is entering into a Samādhi called 'viśuddha viṣaya jyotirvikaraṇa'.⁶² Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī upon receiving the array of light from Śākyamuni started transmitting the message to other Bodhisattvas. So, message received in the mantra form transmitted to the assembled audience through the Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī. In the same chapter Mañjuśrī entered into another Samādhi called 'bodhi sattva caryāniṣyandabodhimaṇḍa'.⁶³ Upon entering this Samadhi the world sphere of all direction became full with lord buddhas. We find the mention of several other Samadhis like 'jyoti ratna pratimaṇḍanoddyotanīm'⁶⁴ where Mañjuśrī is travelling from one terrestrial world to other and building up his own Pālace studded with gems and jewels.

⁶¹ Jan Gonda, *A History of Indian Literature, The Ritual Sutras*, Vol. 1, Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1977, p. 467

⁶² *The Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa*, 1.4

⁶³ *The Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa*, 1.14

⁶⁴ *The Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa*, 1:18

There were a wide array of assembled listeners and deities described and classified in the text. The list is quite long and it covers all the deities in the pantheon as well as the divine and semi-divine figures and the notable devotees. Among the assembled listeners there were tathagata buddhas like: Tathāgata Jyotisaumyagandhavabhāsaśrī, Tathāgata Bhaiṣajyaguruvoidūryaprabhārāja, Subāhu, Suratna, Suvrata, Sunetra, Ratnapāṇi, Vajrapāṇi, Supāṇi, etc.⁶⁵ The hierarchy of Buddhist deities is also found in the description of maṇḍala in chapter 2. At the centre of the mandala, it is instructed to the painter, that the Buddha Śākyamuni should be painted. Then to his right there will be two pratyekabuddhas flanked by two sravakas below them. To the right of them lies Avalokiteśvara white as autumn moon, sitting on a lotus seat.⁶⁶ To his right there will be Tārā, Bhṛkūti and Pāṇḍaravāsīni. Above them were the Prajñāpāramitā, Tathāgatalocana and Uṣṇīśarajñī. Then came the sixteen Bodhisattvas like Sāmantabhadra, Kshitigarbha, Gaganaganja, Maitreya, Vimalavati, Vimaleketu, Sudhana, Chandraprabhā, Vimalakīrti etc.⁶⁷

Most of the studies on the *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa* has focused on the nature of superior ritual performance (uttamasādhana) with specific cult object like paṭa or painted cloths and maṇḍala.⁶⁸ These studies have principally highlighted how the cult object like paṭa paintings became a core medium of ritual practice performed by the sādḥaka by gathering, arranging and consecrating. The rituals, however had multifarious facades and can be studied with different dimensions like the different purpose of their performance and the hierarchical status assigned to them. The present essay aims to understand the nature and interplay between the two most prominent types of rituals viz. laukika or mundane and lokottara or supra mundane.

At the base of the ritual hierarchy in the *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa* lies the stratification of goal for the mantra practitioners. The ultimate purpose of the practitioner of the rituals has been classified into a threefold system in the fourth chapter – the supreme (uttīṣṭha), the middling (madhyama) and the minor (kanyāṣa). The goal is dependent on the particular aspiration of the

⁶⁵ *The Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa*, 1.36 - 1.41

⁶⁶ *The Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa*, 2.140

⁶⁷ *The Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa*, 2.141

⁶⁸ Glenn Wallis, *Meditating the Power of Buddhas: Rituals in the Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa*, New York: State University of New York Press, 2002. Mercelle Lalou, *Iconographie des Etoffes Peintes (pata) dans le Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa*, Paris: Buddhica, Series- I, vol. 6, 1930. Ariane Macdonald, *Le Mandala du Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa*, Paris: Adrien-Maisonneuve, 1962

practitioner. The supreme goal is the complete awakening or samyaksambodhi and the liberation of the pratyekabuddhas and the sravakas. The ability to disappear and attainment of higher social status might be attributed as middling accomplishment. The minor accomplishments on the other hand were the pleasure experienced by the *devas* and *asuras* and the different forms of pacification (*śāntika*), increase (*pauṣṭika*) and expulsion of horrific forces. In regards to the use of a painted cloth or pata as a ritual cultic object, chapter 4-7 have also classified the paṭavidhānavisāra or ritual directory of the painted cloth into the supreme, middling and minor classes.⁶⁹ The *uttama* (chapter 8-10, 26), *madhyama* (chapter 11-12) and *kanyāṣa* (chapter 6) worship method have been also earmarked in the end of the several chapters. The classification of different rituals and objectives thus, were arranged into a hierarchical pattern as might be gleaned from the subtle reading of the text.

This threefold system, however, was not the only hierarchical classification of the objectives and rituals in the *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa*, as we can keenly note another binary scheme of classification apparent throughout the text, namely the *laukika* (mundane) and *lokottara* (supra mundane). These two classes of rituals might also correspond to the various social aspects in the ritual landscape of the *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa*. The *laukika* and *lokottara* scheme of categorization can be observed in the Buddhist deities, mantra, maṇḍala, mudrā and ritual activities. Phyllis Granoff has noted that the *laukika* rituals in the *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa* were assigned lower status in the Buddhist scheme and argued that the principal feature of the *laukika* mantras is that they were borrowed from the non-Buddhist ritual elements.⁷⁰ For him the opposition between *laukika* and *lokottara* might correspond to the “Hindu” (*laukika*) and Buddhist (*lokottara*) painting of the *mandalas* respectively. The *laukika* mantras, explicitly associated with Vaiṣṇava and Śaiva tantras, are proclaimed by Viṣṇu, Śiva, rākṣasa and kinnara, while the *lokottara* mantras are dedicated to the Tathāgatas, Amitābha, Sunetra and Suketu. This marked a drive where the Buddhists were distinguishing themselves from the inferior Brahmanical deities and rituals, the parallel of which might also be found in the Jain tradition. This hypothesis, however can be reviewed in the light of the *laukika* mantra dedicated to the Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī in the *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa*, exemplifying that *laukika* domain did not exclusively belong to the non-Buddhist deities. In the following

⁶⁹ Wallis, *Meditating the Power of Buddhas: Rituals in the Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa*, p. 24

⁷⁰ Phyllis Granoff, “Other People’s Rituals: Ritual Eclecticism in Early Medieval Indian Religions”, in *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, 28/4, p. 404

discussion, we may also note that the laukika mantra dedicated to Śiva and Vishnu were proclaimed by the Mañjuśrī as his original teaching, showing that there were grey boundaries in the identification of the laukika mantra as exclusively Brahmanical. Moreover, we may also keenly observe that the subsidiary deities like vidyā, keśinī and nalinī to whom the laukika mantras were dedicated might not be unquestionably bracketed as ‘Hindu’ deities.

The overarching characteristics of the laukika and lokottara might be grasped in one of the cantos in the seventh chapter where the laukika and lokottara deities were described as worldly and other-worldly entities. In other words, the laukika and every affair associated with it seem to be a representation of the world where we live, while the lokottara is related to a sphere which is beyond the reach of the human beings. This laukika-lokottara scheme was integrally linked to the Buddhist idea of cosmology and several worldly and other-worldly realms (skandas) which are ruled by different guardians. In one of the conversations between the Saṅkusumita Rājendra and Mañjuśrī in the first chapter the various kinds of teaching and accomplishments of laukika and lokottara nature have been outlined. Among the laukika teachings there seems to be a host of matters like astrology, gemology, knowledge of past, present and future, ability to govern and make predictions, ability to travel the end of the earth, to become invisible etc. The lokottara teaching on the other hand is primarily concerned with the attainment of the status of Buddha, Bodhisattva, Sravaka and Pratyekabuddha.⁷¹ The excellent description of the various mantras of laukika type and their potential result may be found in the second chapter. Here, the laukika mantra of the principal Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī as well as his subordinate vidya and deities have been vividly described with their respective potential effects.

Mantra in the *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa* signifies another important ritualistic pattern. The importance of mantra in the *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa* and in Vajrayāna Buddhism in broader sense is analogous to relic or an icon because it represents Buddha or Bodhisattva.⁷² The mantra is believed to empower the speaker with various supernatural powers like ability to travel the end of the earth and to become invisible.⁷³ The one syllable mantra which encompasses the ultimate heart essence

⁷¹ *The Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa*, 1.10

⁷² Glen Wallis, “The Buddha’s Remains: *mantras* in the *Mañjuśrīyamūlakalpa*”, in *Journal of International Association of Buddhist Studies*, p. 3

⁷³ *The Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa*, 1.10

of Mañjuśrī is “Om mam!”⁷⁴ The three syllable mantra “Om ah hrum” accomplishes the purpose of summoning, dismissing, pacifying, enriching, and assaulting. It bestows the power to become invisible, travel through spaces, enter subterranean paradises and walk with great speed.⁷⁵ The listeners of the mantra are cautioned not to disobey the mantra and remember it well as it bestows one the magical power. The root mantra of Noble Mañjuśrī is “Om rā nā! Huṃ huṃ phaṭ phaṭ svāhā!” This mantra is associated with a particular mudrā called the great five-crested mudrā.⁷⁶ There is also mention of six mantras with six syllables each which is believed to be of utmost significance as they originated from Buddha Śākyamuni. These mantras are: “Om vākyaṛthe jayā, Om vākyaśeṣe svāhā, Om vākyaeyānāyāh, Om vyākyaṅistheya, Om vākyaeya namah, Om vākyaeda namah.”⁷⁷ The basic nature of these mantras, as Wallis has argued, is spatial and imaginary where the text never intends to reveal what actually the mantra is, but it shows the reader what the mantra does.⁷⁸ The nature of the mantra thus is confined within the imagination of what the mantra is capable to do. The basic characteristic of the *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa* literature is that it never makes any explicit statement about the mantra. The mantras of the *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa* can be divided among a variety of categories like hṛdaya mantra, āhvāna mantra (invocation), offering mantra, visarjana mantra (dismissal), vidyā mantra and non-Buddhist mantra.

The lowest status of all the mantras were assigned to the laukika mantras as they serve to the humans and taught by the spirits and cater to one’s greed.⁷⁹ The text clearly states that the laukika mantras are the inferior ones in the whole tantra procedure and they generate dubious benefits.⁸⁰ To delineate on the infallibility of the mantras and to advice the strict abiding of the instructions, the author has distinguished between the supreme mantra in contrast to the laukika mantra.⁸¹ The recitation of the laukika mantras, stated the author, would lead to inferior result and affliction.⁸² In regards to the activities or karma, it has also been hierarchised between the supreme and the laukika classes. Different activities and the accumulated karma can result in the range of

⁷⁴ *The Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa*, 1.17

⁷⁵ *The Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa*, 2.4

⁷⁶ *The Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa*, 2.9

⁷⁷ *The Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa*, 7.6

⁷⁸ Wallis, “The Buddha’s Remains”, p. 3

⁷⁹ *The Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa*, 33.34

⁸⁰ *The Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa*, 33.49

⁸¹ *The Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa*, 33.115

⁸² *The Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa*, 33.120

qualities and fruition. The karma of ordinary beings is also not devoid of qualities and they take rebirth based on the basis of their qualities. The karma of supreme nature must be performed in accordance with the authentic practice of mantras which would yield greater qualities. The laukika or worldly activities of the people would produce corresponding low qualities.

Apart from prescribing the religious rituals sometimes the text also mentions a few secular rituals. These rituals are mostly related to taking care of women during their pregnancy or while giving birth and treating a few regular health hazards. In case of a splinter in the flesh the text prescribes to drink old ghee incanted one hundred and eight times or smear it over the affected area leading to eventual coming out of the splinter.⁸³ In the case of indigestion with vomiting and dysentery the text prescribes to incant seven times some sochal salt, sea salt or other type of salt and eat it. In the case of twofold dysentery or sudden dysentery one should mash the fruits or citron with water that is free of living organism and has been incanted once or more⁸⁴. In the case of a barren woman, one should cook the root of winter cherry with ghee, blend it with cow milk and incant it twenty-four times before drinking during her period after bathing.⁸⁵ Then she should unite with her husband sexually. For female disease such as hypermenorrhoea one should grind the root of nilika together with milk add to it some root of the indigo plant and incant these one hundred and eight times. One should then blend it with milk and give it to the patient to drink. Similarly in the case of fever the patient should be offered to drink milk along with ghee.⁸⁶

The idealistic currents of the *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa* primarily emphasise on the full awakening or the samyaksambodhi, ultimately leading to liberation. The Dharma teaching of Mañjuśrī at the end of Chapter 1 provides us with a glance of the idealistic principals of the *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa*. These ideologies are mostly narrated through the prescriptive norms that the practitioner should follow. The two qualities which enable the Bodhisattva to achieve the power through uttering mantra are: a) never abandoning the bodhichittva and b) having equanimity to all sentient beings. The practice will be perfect if he can guard the vows of the bodhichittva discipline and never abandoning his mantra. The text prescribes six qualities which will complete the purpose of practicing the mantra. These are: a) not giving up faith in the three jewels, b) not giving up faith

⁸³ *The Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa*, 9.7

⁸⁴ *The Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa*, 9.8

⁸⁵ *The Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa*, 9.9

⁸⁶ *The Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa*, 9.12.

in the Bodhisattvas, c) praising both mundane and super mundane mantras, d) perceiving the fear of phenomena that is free of elaboration, e) not rejecting the sutras that of the great vehicle that contain profound word and meaning and f) never loosing heart. Thus, the primary emphasis lies in the fact that one should be always inseparable from the bodhichittva.⁸⁷

The *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa* also proves to be an instrumental text to study the notion of sacred space within Buddhism. The text, instead of offering logical propositions to substantiate its claims of power and superiority, is concerned with defining spaces and prescribing activity that should occur in those spaces. A spatial hierarchy in the Buddhist sacred geography was delineated by the textual description of the ideal place to perform the mantra ritual. The mantras of the lotus, elephant and jewel families of Bodhisattvas were prescribed to be ideally practiced in the madhyadeśa.⁸⁸ The city of Vārāṇasī, the regions of Aṅga, Magadha and Kāmarupā were ideal for the mantra practice of Hārītī and yakṣi Pañcikā.⁸⁹ The banks of Brahmaputra and the Vaṅga region were ideal for the mantra rituals of Jambhala.⁹⁰ The ocean shores, the islands and the city of Lanka were the ideal mantra practice of Tārā, Bhṛkūtī and Mahāśrīyā.⁹¹ The mantras of the Uṣṇīṣa kings were believed to be effective in the regions of Kaviśa, Vakhāla and Uddiyana.⁹² The ideal place for practicing the rituals of the pacifying mantra of the laukika nature, on the other hand, was the Himalayan foothills.⁹³ The ideal place for the mantra practice of Kartikkeya, another laukika deity, could be a hideout or caves in mountains or the wild forests. The mantra of the asura, preta, maṭṛs, terrifying grahas, Yama, Śiva and Viṣṇu could be ideally practiced in the southern quarter of Buddhist cosmogony. So, in the Buddhist sacred geography portrayed in the *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa*, the regions of Madhyadeśa, Aṅga, Vaṅga, Kāmarūpa, Vārāṇasī, Brahmaputra valley and the coastal areas constitute the holiest places of Buddhism in the Indian subcontinent, while the Himalayan foothills, the forest area and mountain hideouts along with the southern quarter of Buddhist cosmogony were attributed a lower position in the hierarchy of sacred space.

⁸⁷ *The Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa*, 1.116

⁸⁸ *The Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa*, 30.8

⁸⁹ *The Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa*, 30.10

⁹⁰ *The Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa*, 30.11

⁹¹ *The Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa*, 30.12

⁹² *The Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa*, 30.4

⁹³ *The Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa*, 30.7

3.5 The *Tārāmūlakalpa*

The earliest sculptural representation of Tārā might be found in the Buddhist caves at Kanheri in western India dating back to 6th century CE.⁹⁴ Many scholars suggest that Tārā began to be invoked regularly by the seafarers for a safe journey across the sea. Tārā's alternative names in Tibet, China, Korea and Japan indicates that she is known for her role in saving the voyagers from all kind of troubles on water.⁹⁵ Susan Landesman is also of opinion that “the name Tārā signifies that she who guides or carries others across difficulty, who navigates others across a water body, and she who protects rescues and liberates.”⁹⁶ As Tārā also means star, she might be compared with a star which guides the maritime travelers across treacherous water under the dark night sky. Tārā's maritime connection is also implied by her vehicle – a boat. The vehicle of a deity plays a pivotal role in aiding the worshippers to invoke the desired divinity by providing them a medium. In the very first chapter of *Tārāmūlakalpa* we see that a huge assembly is being held in the grove of Tārā's boat where Śākyamuni and Avalokiteśvara are discussing divine matters. Landesman argues that this scene signifies that the metaphysical vessel of Dharma teaching and physical vessel of the boat are guiding the sentient beings across the ocean of cyclical existence or *saṃsara-sāgara* to reach the shore of liberation.⁹⁷

Though majority of the scholar, including Hirananda Sastri⁹⁸ and Benoytosh Bhattacharyya⁹⁹, are of opinion that Tārā was essentially Buddhist in origin, an alternative view is expressed by Dhavalikar who argues that Tārā appeared in the early Purāṇic texts like *Brahmānda Purāṇa* and *Agni Purāṇa* (4th – 5th centuries CE). Highlighting its brahmanical origin, Dhavalikar pointed out that *Brahmānda Purāṇa* describes Tārā as a mahāsakti and refers to her as Tārāmba or mother. In the *Purāṇas* too she is depicted as the chief of the sailing women controlling the navigation and she is also revered for suppressing the flooded water. The cult of Tārā was later

⁹⁴ M.K. Dhavalikar, ‘The Origin of Tārā’, in *Bulletin of the Deccan College Post-Graduate and Research Institute*, 1963-64, vol. 24, p. 16

⁹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 15

⁹⁶ Susan A. Landesman, *The Tārā Tantra: Tārā's Fundamental Ritual Text (Tārā-mūla-kalpa)*, Somerville: Wisdom Publication, 2007, p. 3

⁹⁷ Landesman, *The Tārā Tantra*, p. 4

⁹⁸ Hirananda Sastri, *The Origin and Cult of Tārā*, MASI, No. 20, Calcutta: Central Publication Branch, 1925

⁹⁹ Benoytosh Bhattacharya, *Indian Buddhist Iconography*, Calcutta: Firma KLM, 1958

transformed into the cult of Pārvatī and Candī as might be observed in the Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa.¹⁰⁰ Despite Dhavalikar's emphasize on Tārā's Brahmanical root, the dominant view however remains that Tārā was essentially a Buddhist deity, the image of whom always carries a miniature image of Akṣobhya in her head. P.C. Bagchi is of opinion that the Chinese cultural elements played an important role in shaping the concept of Tārā in India. Taking a cue from the Cinācāra and Mahācīna Tārā he argues that the deity shared notable similarities with Ekajaṭā whose cult was discovered by Siddha Nāgārjuna in the country of Bhota or Tibet.¹⁰¹ The description of Ekajaṭā in six different sādhanās of *Sādhanamālā* is strikingly identical to the Sādhanas of Mahācīnakrama Tārā, as pointed out by Bagchi.

The *Tārāmūlakalpa* is a ritual compendium of the cult of Tārā in its formative period in India. The full Sanskrit title of the *Tārāmūlakalpa* is *Urdhvajaṭā-mahākalpa-mahābodhisattva-vikurvaṇapaṭāla-vistarād-bhagavatyārya-Tārā-mūla-kalpa-nāma* or *The Fundamental Ritual Text of Bhagavati Ārya Tārā from the Extensive Chapter of the Great Bodhisattva's Magical Manifestation and the Distinguished Ritual Text of Ūrdhvajaṭā*. The book is enlisted in the tantra section (*rgyud*) of the various editions of the Tibetan Canon's scriptural Collection, the Kangyur. While translating the text Susan Landesman has consulted three xylograph redactions of Kangyur, viz.

1. Stog Pālace Kangyur: vol. 107, rhyud 'bam MA
2. Derge, (sde dge) Kangyur, vols. 93, 94; rgyud 'bam
3. Peking Kangyur, vol. 165: rgyud ZA

Landesman confirms that the Sanskrit manuscript of the Text is no longer extant and no commentary of the text is available either.¹⁰² As the *Tārāmūlakalpa* is classified as a scripture or Buddhavacana, its author is of no trace. It is believed that the text is revealed by the Buddha himself and was passed on orally for centuries before it was finally written down. The text is well connected to the Indian scholar Atīśa (982-1054 CE), a renowned monk from Vikramśīla mahavihara as the *Tārāmūlakalpa*'s colophon verses states that the Sanskrit manuscript of the text belonged to Master Atīśa. He arrived in the western Tibet at the age of 60 by the invitation of the

¹⁰⁰ Dhavalikar, 'The Origin of Tārā', p. 17

¹⁰¹ Prabodh Chandra Bagchi, *Studies in Tantra*, Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1939, p. 46

¹⁰² Landesman, *The Tārā Tantra*, p. 20

grandson of Byang-chub-od and spent twelve years in Tibet translating extensively the Sanskrit Buddhist texts. The *Tārāmūlakalpa*, however, was translated into Tibetan by Bu-ston Rin-chen-grub in 1361 after the death of Atīśa.

The *Tārāmūlakalpa* is historically affiliated with the *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa* with which it shares the first thirteen chapters and also carries significant affinity with *Vairocana-abhisambodhi Tantra*. Referring to its striking similarities with the *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa* Landesman has dated the text in 7th century CE. She argues that the *Tārāmūlakalpa* was composed prior to Candragomin's famous commentary *Ekaviṃśati-sādhana* which is believed to have been composed in the 8th century CE in Nālandā. In this text twenty-one form of Tārā and their respective *sādhana*s have been described. The absence of these twenty-one forms in the *Tārāmūlakalpa* indicates that it was composed prior to the proliferation of Tārā's twenty-one form. The *Tārāmūlakalpa*'s dating is also greatly dependent on the Bhavaviveka's *Tarkajvālā* (7th century CE). This text contains the ten syllable *vidyas* of Tārā – *om tāre tuttāre ture svāhā* which also appears in the *Tārāmūlakalpa*. Analyzing the *vidyā* and *guhya* mantra of *Tārāmūlakalpa* and *Tarkajvālā*, Landesman has shown that the two texts were composed in close proximity.¹⁰³ The place of composition of *Tārāmūlakalpa* is difficult to determine and Landesman have not commented on it. However, taking cue from *Tārāmūlakalpa* which has repeatedly mentioned the regions of Gauḍa, Vaṅga and Pauṇḍra¹⁰⁴ we can assume that the *Tārāmūlakalpa* might be a composition of the region of Bengal. The text's origin is also arguably linked with Bengal as it reached Tibet carried by Atīśa who was well connected to Bengal.

The *Tārāmūlakalpa* is generally classified as a *kriya* tantra. However, Landesman has observed that the book borrows significantly from *Maha-vairocana-abhisambodhi Tantra* which is of the nature of *caryā* tantra. She therefore concludes that the text contains mixed contents and might as well be categorized as a *caryā* tantra.¹⁰⁵ The text is a compendium of forty-nine chapters divided into two major sections: a “core text” and “subsequent revelation” or *uttaratantra*. The core text consists of fifteen chapters and the subsequent revelation contains thirty-four chapters. After

¹⁰³ Landesman, *The Tārā Tantra*, p. 23

¹⁰⁴ *The Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa*, 24.142

¹⁰⁵ Landesman, *The Tārā Tantra*, p. 25

analyzing the text Landesman has identified five distinguished layers based on the style and content of writings: two belonged to the core text and three belonged to the subsequent revelation.

As a kriya tantra the *Tārāmūlakalpa* provides with detailed instruction on observing the rituals for attainment of magical power or siddhi which leads one to the path of enlightenment. The text specifies with utmost care the sacred space and time to perform these rituals. One-pointed concentration or samādhi serves to be an effective method of attaining the goal. The primary rituals of the *Tārāmūlakalpa* include maṇḍalas, painting on cotton cloths (paṭa) and fire offering (homa). The fire offering requires special substances like leaves, flowers, fruits, woods, minerals which are ritually consecrated by the recitations of vidyās and mantras.¹⁰⁶ The maṇḍalas and their formation constitute an important part of the ritual world of the *Tārāmūlakalpa*. Ronald M Davidson, who has endeavored to elucidate on the social aspect of various tantra rituals, has argued that maṇḍalas explicitly reflect a political structure where the central deity is a rājādhirājā and maintain feudal like relationship with the subsidiary deities. maṇḍalas might be seen as a metaphor of public life and reaction to the extant feudal system where the monks after coronation receive explicit authority in the monastic system.¹⁰⁷

In the first layer of the *Tārāmūlakalpa*, i.e. from chapter 1 to 11 we find at least ten names of Tārā each of which has distinct iconography and vidyā. These are Bhagavati Ārya Tārā, Mahāvidyārajñī, Protectress Ekajaṭī, Ūrdhvajaṭā, Kurukulla, Goddess Tārā, Chintatārāvati, Maḥāsī, Paṇḍaravāsīnī-Bhṛkūti-Dṛḍha and Bodhisattva. Tārā's is most frequently referred to by the epithet of Bhagavati Ārya Tārā. Her golden complexion, rich ornamentation and boon granting gesture suggest that she is a goddess of good fortune and prosperity. She essentially embodies a composite figure where Khadiravanī Tārā, Chintāmani Tārā and Aṣṭamahābhaya Tārā are presented in a conglomerated form. Her enlightenment is a result of her understanding of the true nature of awareness in meditation. There are mention of four vidyās – root vidyā (mūla vidyā), essence incantation (hṛdaya), the near essence incantation (upa hṛdaya) and the most concise essence-incantation (parama hṛdaya). The text also specifies the number of times they need to be recited. The Ārya Tārā appears in *Tārāmūlakalpa*'s first paṭa rituals where she is situated below

¹⁰⁶ Landesman, *The Tārā Tantra*, p. 34

¹⁰⁷ Ronald M Davidson, *Indian Esoteric Buddhism: A Social History of the Tantric Movement*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2002, p. 131

Avalokiteśvara in a mountain abode. Paṇḍaravāsīnī is dressed in white, Bhṛkūti with knitted brow, and Dṛdha with firmed eyes. The first layer of the *Tārāmūlakalpa* depicts two of the Tārā's most prominent forms – Ārya Tārā and Ekajaṭī. Tārā is depicted in this layer as a golden goddess, companion of Avalokiteśvara, protector from danger and embodiment of compassion. The root *vidya* of Ekajaṭī describes her with red complexion and she shares features with golden Manjuśrī and golden Vairocana.

In the second layer, i.e. chapter 12 and 13, she is depicted as a great white goddess (ārya mahasvetā devī), glorious goddess (mahaśrī) and earth goddess. Tārā's great white form has been described in chapter 12 where she is portrayed with Avalokiteśvara whose locks are tied up. She is seated on a lion throne, holding a lotus in one hand, while another hand showing boon granting gesture. In chapter 13, Tārā is depicted as mahaśrī and earth goddess. In both of these forms she appears along with Avalokiteśvara and protects the practitioner from all danger. In Chapter 12 and 13, the paṭa rituals are predominantly characterized by the six different coloured-Avalokiteśvaras and provide detailed description of his iconographic details. He is depicted in thirteen sādhanas and his locks are tied up (Ūrdhajaṭā). The depiction of Tārā without bodily colour and bound up locks point to the importance of Avalokiteśvara in this chapter. In the second layer Avalokiteśvara's companions have been referred to not by the direct name of Tārā but by her different epithets. Landesman argues that the rituals in this layer also was historically important as these render one the royal power and land. The second layer of the root tantra also shows that Tārā's iconography and ritual becomes more complex. In one ritual of uttarantra, Avalokiteśvara is accompanied by "seven Tārās" (Śrī Devī, Pāṇḍaravāsīnī, Candrā, Śrī Yaśovatī, Śvetā, Mahāśvetā, and Bhṛkūṭī) indicating that the later part of the TMK is marked by even more proliferation in Tara's number.

Tārā in the 4th – 5th centuries CE emerged as a Mahāyāna deity who was regularly invoked by the seafarers for their safety in the water and in the visual she appeared by the side of Avalokiteśvara in the 6th century CE. With its strong Buddhist root in the inception, Tārā was also accommodated in the Purāṇic literature as a deity to be invoked by the maritime travelers. From 7th century CE onwards Tārā was tantricised with its root or bija mantra appearing in the texts like the *Tārāmūlakalpa* and the *Tarkajvālā*. The *Tārāmūlakalpa*'s classification in the *rgyud* or the tantra section of kangyur affirms that the ritual and culture described in this text was evidently

oriented to tantrism. Tārā in the first layer of the *Tārāmūlakalpa*'s core tantra, was depicted predominantly as Arya Tārā and Ekajaṭī with golden complexion. The second layer shows that Tārā's comparatively independent nature in the previous layer was gradually changing and she was presented with Avalokiteśvara in consortium. The second layer also shows that Tārā's ritual and iconography were becoming complicated. The divine nature of Tārā depicted in the *Tārāmūlakalpa* was primarily characterized as a composite figure where different forms like Ekajaṭā, Maḥaśrī, Bhṛkūṭi, Kurukullā were embodied in the idea of a common goddess. The 7th century CE was marked by a syncretic culture of Tārā under which different deities and cults were melting in composite form.

The later period, especially from 8th century CE onwards Tara's different forms and ritualistic complexities were proliferated further. Chandragomin's commentary *Ekaviṃsatī-sādhanā* indicates that Tārā assumed a whole lot of forms for whom twenty-one sādhanas were dedicated. In the 10th and 11th centuries the iconographic texts like the *Sādhanamālā* and *Niṣpannayogāvalī* show that various aspects of Tārā was gradually emerging with distinguished iconography and invocation methods. Kurukulla and Bhṛkūṭi were placed under the family of Amitābha, Mahācinatārā and Ekajaṭā were placed under the family of Akṣobhya, Khadirāvanī Tārā, Maḥaśrī Tārā and Dhanadā Tārā were placed under the family of Amoghasiddhi and Vajratārā was placed under the family of Ratnasambhava. The two-armed and one-faced deity in the *Tārāmūlakalpa* was turned into four, six or eight-handed and three or four-faced deity. So, the different manifestations of Tārā assumed independent entity and came to be worshipped with distinguished worship method.

3.6 The *Sādhanamālā*

The *Sādhanamālā* is a late 11th to early 12th century Sanskrit Buddhist text dealing with the method of worship of several Buddhist deities. The text is best known for iconographic descriptions of the Buddhist deities. The text is also known as *Sādhanasamuccaya*, *Sādhanamālātantra*, *Sādhanatantra* in different manuscripts. There are at least 38 manuscripts around the world, including the eight used by Benoytosh Bhattacharyya which is till date

considered as the standard edition of the text.¹⁰⁸ While editing a complicated and erroneous text like *Sādhanamālā* Benoytosh Bhattacharyya had consulted some old Sanskrit version of the text left in paper and palm-leaf. The original Sanskrit MSS which Bhattacharyya has analyzed and utilized in editing the two volumes of *Sādhanamālā* are characterized by mismatch between themselves and also pose a great deal of grammatical and linguistic errors. There is total eight MSS which Bhattacharyya names A, B, C, N, Ab, Ba, Na and Nb.¹⁰⁹ Among them Na and Nb are most corrupt and Bhattacharyya has consulted them less than the other MSS while compiling the whole book. Two of these MSS have been derived from Cambridge University Library; two from the Durbar Library of Nepal while the rest four from the library of Asiatic Society of Bengal.

A is a complete MS though full of spelling mistakes, omissions and repetition. Spelling mistakes are ten per line on average and it was found in the library of Asiatic Society of Bengal. The original text from which **B** has been copied is dated in 1165 CE. Being old it is in some degree correct though omission and errors are quite numerous. It is incomplete in the beginning, in the middle and a few leaves are lost in the end also. It is found in the university library of Cambridge. **C** is a paper MS belonging to Cambridge University Library. The date given is 1819. In arrangement it is similar to A, N and Nb. A and C appear to have derived from common original source as they commit same kind of mistakes and repetition. **N** is in palm leaf and in good preservation, though some leaves at the end have been blurred and erased by constant handling. This MS of *Sādhanamālā* appears to be written between 1275 and 1300 CE. It was found in the library of Asiatic Society of Bengal. The original MS of **AB** is in palm leaf and was found in the library of Asiatic society of Bengal. The reading in this MS is in disagreement with other MSS in many respects. It is also not regular in its arrangement. The writing in the MS is more akin to the triangular variety of Brahmi and the date may be placed somewhere in the beginning of the 12th century. Bhattacharyya has found two copies of the paper MS of **Ba**, one in the library of Asiatic Society and other in the Central Library of Baroda. It is an incomplete MSS and the first and last page of it is written in a different and in a much later hand. Bhattacharyya has dated the MS 300 years back according to the style of its writing. In arrangement it generally follows the MS A, N

¹⁰⁸ Ruriko Sakuma, 'Sanskrit Manuscripts of the *The Sādhanamālā*', *Nagoya Studies in Indian Culture and Buddhism*, 2001, 21: 27.

¹⁰⁹ *The Sādhanamālā*, vol-I, pp. Xi-XiV

and C with occasional omissions. The MS mentions its date in 1104 CE but it appears to be the date of the original text from which it has been copied since its writing belongs to a much later period. **Na** is a very defective paper MS and its writing also seem to be very modern. It is full of errors and omissions. It was found in Durbar library of Nepal and it is dated in 1938. In content it agrees with A, C and N. **Nb** is also very defective MS and very incorrect one. It is preserved in the Durbar library, Nepal. It does not agree with any other MS and contains at the end some portion of another work.

The MSS A, C and Na distinctly state in the last colophon that the name of the work is Sādhanamālā.¹¹⁰ The MS Ba has the letters Sa and Ma on the margin of every page and this appears to be the abbreviation of the word Sādhanamālā. N is also called Sādhanamālā in the catalogue of the library though the last page is faded for constant handling. Only MS Nb mentions that the name is Sādhanāsamucchaya, though in none of the other MSS it is found. MS A, N and Na begin with the Sādhanā of Trisamayārājā while C begins with Vajrāsanā Sādhanā and B and Ba are incomplete in their beginning. Ab and Nb begin with Vajravārāhī Sādhanā and their arrangements are completely different from others. As far as the ending is concerned MSS A, C, N and Na end with the same Sādhanā of Sodasabhujā-MahakalaSādhanā.

The eight MSS, as is evident from their arrangement of Sādhanās, language used and the first and last Sādhanā they mentioned, are mostly in disagreement with each other. The last two MSS i.e. Na and Nb have hardly any resemblance with others. Nevertheless, the subject matter they deal with and the arrangement of some Sādhanās as well as the beginning and ending indicates their common predecessor. A, C, N and Nb are found to be similar in the arrangement of Sādhanās despite their other differences. In the MS B we find that the original text from which it was copied had been dated in 1165 CE. Though, it is the earliest date that we get from the text itself, many of the Sādhanās were composed in as early as 4th century since Asanga has been mentioned in the text as the composer of Sādhanā devoted to Prajñāpāramitā (No. 159)¹¹¹. The final compilation of all the Sādhanās probably took place during later 11th or early 12th century.

¹¹⁰ *The Sādhanamālā*, Vol-I, p. XiV

¹¹¹ *The Sādhanamālā*, Vol-II, p. XciV

The authors of the Sāadhanamālā are numerous and belonged to different times and are important indicators of the long-time span in which the Sāadhanās were composed. Though most of the Sāadhanās out of total 312 are anonymous, some of them mention the name of the authors. In the introduction of Sāadhanamālā volume II Bhattacharyya has given a list of total 47 authors who have been mentioned in the text. Some of them have been mentioned in Tibetan Bstan-ghyur which also provides their other composition occasionally, while others are new and are known for the first time from the text. In most of the cases where Bstan-ghyur mentions their names, it also gives small background of the authors and mentions the names of their Gurus and the monasteries they belonged to. The following is the list of the authors –

Name of the author	Period	Sāadhanās composed
Abhayākaragupta	1048-1130 CE	295
Advayavajra	978-1030 CE	17, 217, 51
Ajitamitra	Early 12 th century	55
Asaṅga	270-350 CE	159
Cintāmani Dutta	-	47
Dharmakaramati	-	97, 210
Durjayachandra	-	250
Garbha	-	142
Gunākaragupta	-	272
Harihara	-	53
Indrabhūti	-	174
Kalyāṅgarbha	-	242
Karuṇā	753 CE	187. 303
Kokādutta	1100 CE	218
Kṛṣṇapāda	-	181
Śrīkṛṣṇarājā	717 CE	161 (?)
Kukkuripāda	693 CE	240
Kula	1100 CE	154
Kumārakaragupta	-	293
Kumudakaramati	-	1

Lalitagupta	1050 CE	128
Mangalasena	-	273
Manoratha Rakṣitā	-	164
Mañjughoṣa	-	28
Muktadā	1100 CE	45,56, 172
Nāgārjuna	645 CE	96, 127
Padmavardhana	-	155
Padmakaramati	-	14
Prabhāarakarakīrti	1100 CE	85
Prajñāpālita	-	28
Ratnakaraśānti	978-1030 CE	110
Ratnakara	1100 CE	73
Ratnākaragupta	1100 CE	2, 255
Ravigupta	-	79
Śabara	657 CE	185, 236
Sahajavilāsa	-	183, 231
Sanghadatta	1075 CE	154
Saraha	633 CE	Two Sāadhanās of Rakta Lokeśvara
Svāsatavajra	1100 CE	101
Sarcajñamitra	1050 CE	109
Śrīdhara	1100 CE	161
Sujanabhadrā	1100 CE	66, 296
Sumatibhadra	-	306
Trailokyavajra	1100 CE	266
Vairocana Rakṣitā	728-764 CE	264, 271
Virupākṣa	-	312

It can be easily surmised that the authors of different Sāadhanās ranged from the 4th century CE during the time of Asanga to 1150 CE during the time of Abhayākaragupta and they represented a long Buddhist literary and spiritual culture spanning over several centuries. The

synopsis of content also makes us believe that it is a heterogeneous collection of work without any definite plan of the authors. Who then compiled their work in a single book and from when did the process start is a question whose answer is rather obscure to us. Sādhanamālā is therefore not only the work of multiple authors but also is consisted of writings of eight centuries. The Sādhanās might be scattered in the other works of the respective authors or just loosely memorized and practiced by the people before they were compiled in a single book. Now from the earliest MS we can assume that the process of compilation begun roughly during the middle of 11th century and then several copies of the book were produced from time to time. Compiling such diverse work also indicates that a drive was felt by the compilers towards standardizing the tenets of Buddhist tantra.

Most of the authors belonged to some vihāras or mahāvihāras of Bengal during their time and they were mentioned in the Tibetan Bstan-hgyur with the epithets of Paṇḍita, Mahāpaṇḍita, Siddhācārya, Ācārya and Mahācārya. Some of them like Advayavajra also found mention in Tāranātha's account.¹¹² But many authors like Cintāmani Dutta (composer of the Sādhanā of Vadirat, Kalyāngarbha), Karuṇā (composer of Sādhanā of Kurukullā and Mahakala), Kumārakaragupta (composer of the Sādhanā of Ucchusma Jambhala), Mangalaseṇa (composer of the Sādhanā of Kṛṣṇayamāri), are not mentioned elsewhere except in the Sādhanamālā itself.¹¹³ Seldom have we found that they are referred with the epithets like Paṇḍita, Mahāpaṇḍita, Ācārya or Mahācārya. To which social milieu they belonged to is difficult to infer. In this case chances of incorporation of the work of the grassroot writers beyond the literary fold of Buddhist monasteries cannot be entirely ruled out.

As far as the language is concerned the text poses yet another difficulty as pointed out by Benoytosh Bhattacharyya. Though Sādhanamālā is written in Sanskrit it is far from what we understand by the word.¹¹⁴ Its vocabulary contains words which are impossible according to Sanskrit grammar like *devati* (goddess), *parami* (perfection), *lambābayeta* (should be hung).¹¹⁵ In the matter of sandhi the language is very loose, especially where the visarga is concerned.

¹¹² *The Sādhanamālā*, vol-II, p. XliV

¹¹³ *The Sādhanamālā*, vol-II, pp. XIV-IXiii

¹¹⁴ *The Sādhanamālā*, vol-I, p. iX

¹¹⁵ *The Sādhanamālā*, vol-I, p. X

Regarding the orthography none of the MSS of *Sādhanamālā* make any distinction between several letters or between vowels. The *Sādhanamālā* also changes the gender randomly without following any rule. In some cases, two vowels are kept in juxtaposition without being joined together by the rules of sandhi. Such a hybridization in the language of MSS can be caused by two factors. Firstly, when the text started to be copied and reproduced in large numbers the language started to be infiltrated with errors. Benoytosh Bhattacharyya has used eight MSS (A, B, C, N, Ab, Ba, Na and Nb) which has been discussed earlier and we find that the MSS belong to different period and the hybridization in the language in each of them varies to a great extent. Secondly, the hybridization in the language might also be indicative of the author's poor familiarity with the language. In other words, it can also be a consequence of incorporating the peripheral cults of the authors within the mainstream Sanskrit Buddhist literature.

Sādhanā of a particular deity is followed by mantras and *dhāraṇīs* where vernacular and Prakrit words are found in abundance. Although in the whole book there is scarcity of vernacular and Prakrit words, their abundance in the mantras and *dhāraṇīs* appears to be peculiar. This might render the mantras and *dhāraṇīs* a different character in terms of the time of their composition and their composers. The mantras or mystic syllables constitutes the base of tantric worship and Vajrayāna. There are innumerable variety of Mantras like – *bīja*, *hṛdaya*, *upahṛdaya*, *pujā*, *arghya*, *puṣpa*, *dhūpa*, *dīpa*, *naiveya*, *netra*, *śikhā*, *astra*, *rakṣā* and so forth. Though the mantras are unmeaning words, they represent the imprint of a language unknown. The mantra of *Jāngulī* for example shows considerable fusion of another language. Chanting of meaningless sounds and thus creating a tempore for mystic experience can be considered as one important dimension of tantra element in Buddhism.

The text begins with two *Sādhanās* of *Trisamayarājā*, who has been identified as *Amoghasiddhi*, one of the five *Dhyānī* Buddhas. They are followed by three *Sādhanās* of *Vajrāsanā* Buddha who has been identified as *Dhyānī* Buddha *Akṣobhya*. In the *Sādhanamālā* it is stated that the worshipper should meditate himself as *Vajrāsanā* who displays the *Bhusparsa Mudrā* in his right hand while the left rests on the lap. He is dressed in red garments and sits on the *Vajra* marked double lotus placed on the four *Maras* of blue, white, red and green colour. He is peaceful in appearance and his body is endowed with all major auspicious marks. To the right of the God is *Maitreya* *Bodhisattva* who is white, two-armed and wears *Jaṭāmukuta*. Similarly to the left of the

god is Lokeśvara of white complexion carrying in his right hand a chowri and in the left hand a lotus.¹¹⁶

Vajrāsana's Sādhanā is followed by 37 Sādhanās of Avalokiteśvara (6-43). The sadhanas were devoted to his various manifestations namely Ṣaḍākṣarī Lokeśvara, Lokanātha, Halāhala, Vajradharma, Khasrapaṇa, Siṃhanāda, Padmānaratteśvara, Trailokyavāsaṅkara, Nīlakantha, Mayājālakrama Lokeśvara and Sugatisandarśana. Ṣaḍākṣarī Lokeśvara has been attributed total four Sādhanās where it is stated that the worshipper should think himself as Lokeśvara who is decked in all sorts of ornaments, white in colour and four-armed, carrying the lotus in the left hand and rosary in the right.¹¹⁷ To the worship of Siṃhanāda four Sādhanās have been attributed. It is stated that he is of white complexion with three eyes and the Jaṭāmukuta. He is without ornaments, clad in tiger-skin and sits on a lion with the attitude of princely ease¹¹⁸. The Sādhanā of Khasrapaṇa Avalokiteśvara is rather peculiar than others which states that the rays of crores of moon radiates from his body. He holds the image of Amitābha on his head and sits on the moon over a double lotus in the Ardhaparyāṅka attitude. He is decked in all sorts of ornaments, has a smiling face, exhibits the Varadā pose in the right hand, and holds a lotus with a stem in the left. He resides in the womb of mount Potalaka, looks beautiful with compassion, is full of sentiment of amour. Before him is Tārā and to the right is Sudhanakumāra. To the west of the god is Bhṛkūti and to the north Hayagrīva.¹¹⁹

Avalokiteśvara has been attributed with second highest Sādhanā after Mañjuśrī. So many Sādhanās for many manifestations of the deity indicates that he must assumed a significant place in Buddhist tantra. The wide availability of the stone and metal sculptures of the deity, as will be seen in the next chapter, also attests the fact that in material sphere too he was a very popular figure like in the literature. Avalokiteśvara has been mentioned by Asaṅga in as early as 4th century. From then onwards he continued to be featuring in several Buddhist texts like Kāraṇḍavyūha where he

¹¹⁶ *The Sādhanamālā*, Vol-I, p. 24

¹¹⁷ *The Sādhanamālā*, Vol-I, p. 27

¹¹⁸ *The Sādhanamālā*, Vol-I, p. 63

¹¹⁹ *The Sādhanamālā*, Vol-I, pp. 39-41

is said to be reject his hard-earned salvation for the sake of all the people in the world and it is stated that he had taken an oath to stay in this world until every other person attains bodhi.

The Sādhanās of Avalokiteśvara are followed by 41 Sādhanās (44-84) devoted to the different form of Mañjuśrī, the god of wisdom. His different forms mentioned in Sādhanamālā are Sthiracakra, Vādirāt, Mañjughoṣa, Arapacana, Vajrānaṅga, Dharmadhātuvagīśvara, Vāk, Siddhāikavīra, Mahārājātila-Mañjuśrī, Alimanmatha, Vajrātikāsanā, Dharmasankhasamādhi-Mañjuśrī, Nāmsangīti and Mañjuvajra. The Vāk, also known as Vajrarāga Mañjuśrī is two-armed and one faced and has white colour. His two arms are joined in Samādhi mudrā and he is decked in all princely ornaments, wears the five pieces of monkey like garments.¹²⁰ Mañjuśrī of Dharmadhātu-Vagīśvara form is eight-armed, four-faced and reddish white colour. He holds the bow and the arrow in one pair of hands, the noose and goad in another pair, the Prajñāpāramitā manuscript and sword in the third, and the ghanta and the Vajra in the fourth hand.¹²¹ Another important form of Mañjuśrī is Mañjughoṣa to whom four Sādhanās have been ascribed. It is stated that he rides a lion and golden in colour. He is decked in all ornaments and his hands are engaged in forming the vyākhyana mudrā. He displays the night lotus in his left and bears the image of Akṣobhya in his head.¹²²

In the whole of Sādhanamālā the highest numbers of Sādhanās have been attributed to Mañjuśrī and his different manifestations and we can assume from here that he has been the most prominent god in the text. The images of Mañjuśrī hailed from Bihar and Bengal are also plenty in number and are often found to be concentrated in and surrounding the region of a Buddhist Mahāvihāra like Nālandā. Being the god of wisdom and knowledge it is likely that his worship would be popular among the literate groups inhabiting in the Mahāvihāras.

Then follow the Sādhanās for the worship of a long series of female divinities who are generally designated by the name of Tārā though the method of their worship and their physical appearance differ widely from one another. The Sādhanās from 89 to the end of volume I are devoted to the worship of these female divinities, namely Khadiravani Tārā, Varada Tārā, Vasya

¹²⁰ *The Sādhanamālā*, Vol-I, p. 129

¹²¹ *The Sādhanamālā*, Vol-I, p. 128

¹²² *The Sādhanamālā*, Vol-I, p. 109

Tārā, Vajra Tārā, Astamahābhaya Tārā, Mahācina Tārā, Mṛtyuvañcana Tārā, Sitā Tārā, Sadvujāsukla-Tārā, Jāṅgulī-Tārā, Dhanada-Tārā, Sragdhara-Tārā, Durgottarini-Tārā, Visvamātā, Prasanna-Tārā, Ārya-Tārā, Mahāśri-Tārā, Vidyujjvalakarali Ekajaṭā, Cundā, Māricī, Prajñāpāramitā, Sarasvati and Bhṛkūti. There are different kind of manifestations of each of them with different form and colour. One striking feature of the Sādhanās of female goddesses is that they outnumber the male gods and their Sādhanās are also almost equal to the male gods. The cult of worship of female goddess therefore occupied an important place in Buddhist pantheon as Sādhanamālā reveals.

The Khadiravanī Tārā has been described as green in colour and bears the image of Amoghasiddhi on her crown. She shows the Varada Mudrā and the Uṭpala in the right and left hand respectively. To the right and left of her appear Asokakanta Māricī and Ekajaṭā¹²³. There is practically no difference between her form and Vaśya Tārā.¹²⁴ The Sādhanā of Sadvuja Sitā Tārā ascribes the deity with three faces and six arms. Her right face is yellow and the left blue in colour and the faces are endowed with three eyes each. Her three right hands show the varadā mudrā the rosary and the arrow and the three left carry the Uṭpala, the lotus and the bow. She sits in Ardhaparyāṅka attitude and shines like a moon, and bears the effigy of Amoghasiddhi on her crown. Her head is embellished by five severed heads and the crescent moon.¹²⁵

Among all the goddesses of the *Sādhanamālā*, Cundā probably is the oldest according to Bhattacharyya who argues that the very first mention of her name Candra, which is considered to be the same as Cundā appears in the *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa*.¹²⁶ As Cundāvajrī, she finds mention in one of the earliest tantra works, the *Guhyasamāja* (5th century CE). Cundā is also mentioned in the *Śikṣāsamucchaya* of Śīntideva in the 7th century. Three Sādhanās in the *Sādhanamālā* have been designated to the worship of Cundā which describe her attribution in more or less same way. She is described as having the colour of autumn moon, and four-armed. She shows the varadā mudrā

¹²³ *The Sādhanamālā*, Vol-I, p. 176

¹²⁴ Benoytosh Bhattacharya, *Indian Buddhist Iconography*, p. 229

¹²⁵ *The Sādhanamālā*, p. Vol-I, 216

¹²⁶ Benoytosh Bhattacharya, *Indian Buddhist Iconography*, p. 221

in the right hand and holds a book on a lotus in the left. The two other hands hold the bowl and she is decked in all ornaments.¹²⁷

The *Sādhanamālā* has dedicated a great number of sadhanas to the five great protectresses or Pañcamahārakṣā deities. These host of sadhanas began with Mahāpratisarā to whom three Sādhanās (194-196) were ascribed. She is followed by other protectresses like Mahāmāyūrī (197), Mahāsahasrapramardīni (198), Mahāmantrānusārāni (199) and Mahāsītāvātī (200). The next Sādhanās (201 to 206) are devoted to Mahārakṣā deities like Mahāpratyaṅgīrā (202), Dhvajagrakeyūrā (203), Aparājītā (204) and Vajragāndhārī (205). In the *Sādhanamālā* we find that the direction to worship these goddesses along with their appropriate mantras is given. The worship of five protectress deities is very popular in Nepal.¹²⁸ According to the *Sādhanamālā* when these Rakṣa deities are worshipped, they grant long life. They protect kingdoms, villages and meadows. They also protect man from evil spirits, diseases and famines.

The text devoted a series of Sādhanās to the worship of Heruka, the mightiest god in the whole pantheon. He is conceived in a variety of form and to each of these forms several Sādhanās are attributed. Mahāmāyā or the four –faced and four-armed Heruka has been devoted with two Sādhanās (239-240). The two-faced Heruka with or without the Śakti has nine Sādhanās (241-249) while Vajradāka or the three-faced and six-armed Heruka who is also called Saptākṣarā because seven syllable mantras have been ascribed to him has the two next Sādhanās (250-251). The next two Sādhanās (252-253) deal with the process of Bahyapujā (external worship) and Hastapujā (worship with hand) of Cakrasaṃvara who is a manifestation of Heruka with the Śakti Vajravarāhī. The union of the two is the subject matter of Cakrasaṃvara Tantra. The next Sādhanā (254) is devoted to the worship of Buddhakalpa who is none but Heruka himself with four arms and represented as united with his Śakti Citrasena. This is also subject matter of the *Buddhakalpa Tantra*. The last Sādhanā (255) of Heruka series is devoted to the worship of Cakrasaṃvara or Heruka who is united with his Śakti Vajravarāhī.

3.7 The Niṣpannayogāvalī

¹²⁷ *The Sādhanamālā*, Vol-II, p. 271

¹²⁸ Benoytosh Bhattacharya, *Indian Buddhist Iconography*, p. 302

Unlike the *Sādhanamālā*, the *Niṣpannayogāvalī* is the work of a singular author who can be placed in a definite time and space. Its author Mahāpaṇḍita Abhayākaragupta flourished in the famous Vikramśilā Mahāvihāra founded by the Pāla king Dharmapāla (775-800 CE). Benoytosh Bhattacharyya has dated the author in the fourth quarter of the 11th century and the first quarter of 12th century. Besides, being an excellent scholar in Sanskrit Abhayākaragupta was an expert in Tibetan and translated many of his books into Tibetan by himself. In the Bstan-gyur catalogue of P. Cordier, twenty-four works including the *Niṣpannayogāvalī* have been attributed to Abhayākaragupta.¹²⁹ Such wide range of work truly establishes the fact that he was a Buddhist scholar of high merit. Bhattacharyya has argued that his prescription of iconography was followed with reverence in Tibet as many statuettes discovered in the Peiping town of Tibet by Stael Holstein in 1926 bear significant resemblance with the description of the text.¹³⁰

The Buddhist pantheon represented in the *Niṣpannayogāvalī* assumed a very complex character than the *Sādhanamālā*, but it is systematic in nature. Here, the deities are represented through different maṇḍalas where the direction and colour of each of them played a very important role. The reference of maṇḍalas or the sacred circular design of a particular deity can be traced back to the 5th century CE in the *Guhyasamājatantra*. Twenty-six such maṇḍalas have been described in the *Niṣpannayogāvalī* in its twenty-six chapters. A large number of these descriptions are absolutely original and highly informative. Many of the deities described accurately in the *Niṣpannayogāvalī* are not to be found anywhere in printed literature. The number of varied deities and their complex physical characteristics presented in the *Niṣpannayogāvalī* is of course more prolific and extensive than the *Sādhanamālā*. This might be due to the fact that there had been a continuous process within Buddhist tantra to either incorporate deities of other cult in their pantheon or creating new ones to recognize new fields of social life. The pantheon being further complex and larger with the passing time was also an important marker that the religion was not static and was constantly shaping itself according to the need of their own time by deriving and incorporating new elements.

¹²⁹ Benoytosh Bhattacharyya (ed), *Niṣpannayogāvalī of Mahāpaṇḍita Abhayākaragupta*, Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1949, p. 9

¹³⁰ The *Niṣpannayogāvalī*, p. 12

In the text at least 600 deities have been mentioned and described with their iconographic details.¹³¹ The Vajrayānist believed that the ultimate cause of the universe is śūnya from which everything originates and into which everything merges. The individual soul or Bodhisattva/Bodhicittva remains separated from Śūnya or universal soul due to ignorance and impurities. The ignorance and impurities can be removed only by continuous meditation on Śūnya. The deities according to the divine belief emanates from this meditation. According to the *Guhyasamāja* when the Bodhicittva secures oneness with Śūnya or the Infinite Spirit in the highest state of meditation its mind is filled with innumerable visions and scenes. This state of mind continues till the Bodhicittva visualizes letters of the alphabet as germ syllables, which gradually assumes the shape of deities. The form of these deities initially appears very obscure to the Yogī but later it transforms into perfect distinct shape which actually represents the embodiment of infinite. Once the deities are visualized in regular course of meditation, they never leave the ascetic, but become one with him. The deities also bestow on the ascetic more psychic and supernatural power.

The *Niṣpannayogāvalī* like other Buddhist work of tantrism gave prominence to the five Dhyānī Buddhas namely Vairocana, Ratnasambhava, Amitābha, Amoghasiddhi and Akṣobhya. They are the representatives of five elements or skandhas by which the universe is formed. These skandhas are rūpa (form), vedanā (sensation), saṃjñā (name), saṃskāra (conformation) and vijñana (consciousness). The deities of the Buddhist pantheon mostly represent these elemental forces. Each kula or family of deities is an extension of a single Dhyānī Buddha idea. The text very distinctively stated each of their directions, mudrās, and vehicles in the Dharmadhātuvagīśvara Maṇḍala.¹³² In Māricī Maṇḍala¹³³ the colour of each of the Dhyānī Buddhas was specified. Akṣobhya has been assigned east direction, bhusparśa mudrā, blue colour and elephant vehicle. Vairocana has been assigned centre direction, Dharmacakra Mudrā, white colour and dragon vehicle. Amitābha has been assigned west direction, samādhi mudrā, red colour and peacock vehicle. Ratnasambhava has been assigned south direction, varadā mudrā, yellow colour and horse vehicle. Amoghasiddhi has been assigned north direction, Abhaya Mudrā, green colour and Gaḍuḍa vehicle. The text also mentions the name of the families of five Dhyānī

¹³¹ The *Niṣpannayogāvalī*, p. 18

¹³² The *Niṣpannayogāvalī*, p. 65

¹³³ The *Niṣpannayogāvalī*, p. 41

Buddhas as dveṣa, moha rāga, cintāmantī and samaya of Akṣobhya, Vairocana, Amitābha, Ratnasambhava and Amoghasiddhi respectively.

Another spectacular contribution of the *Niṣpannayogāvalī* is that it introduces several new kuleśa or the original familial head of deities appearing in the intermediary corners. So far, the texts preceding the *Niṣpannayogāvalī* had only mentioned five cardinal corners of five Dhyānī Buddhas. But the *Niṣpannayogāvalī* for the first time introduced four more Kuleśa in the intermediary corners of Agni, Nairṛāta, Vāyu and Isāṇa in the Dharmadhātuvagīśvara Maṇḍala.¹³⁴ It is said that the deities in the Agni corner have Vajroṣṇīṣa or Akṣobhya as their Kuleśa; the deities in the Nairṛāta corner have Ratnoṣṇīṣa or Ratnasambhava as their kuleśa; the deities in the Vāyu corner have Padmoṣṇīṣa or Amitābha as their Kuleśa and the deities in the Isāṇa corner have Viśvoṣṇīṣa or Amoghasiddhi as their Kuleśa. The four new Kuleśas namely Vajroṣṇīṣa, Ratnoṣṇīṣa, Padmoṣṇīṣa and Viśvoṣṇīṣa are stated as the second name of Akṣobhya, Ratnosambhava, Amitābha and Amoghasiddhi respectively. This phenomenon is certainly due to the overwhelming increase of the number of deities and the drive to assign them under new Kuleśas.

The *Niṣpannayogāvalī* is also characterized by a drive to deify a whole range of spiritual ideas considered to be sacred in Buddhism. The twelve bhūmis or heavens as acknowledged by the Vajrayāna Buddhists were all deified with a human form, colour, weapon and symbols. These twelve bhūmis are: Adhimuktīcārya, Pramuditā, Vimalā, Prabhākārī, Arciṣmati, Sudurjaya, Abhimukhī, Duraṅgamā, Acalā, Sādhumati, Dharmamegha, and Sāmantaprabhā. Alongside the bhūmis the author also deified the twelve pāramitās which according to Buddhist idea is considered to be great qualities leading to Buddhahood. All these qualities are deified with heads, hands weapons and symbols. These paramitas are: Ratna, Dāna, Śīla, Ksānti, Virya, Dhyāna, Prajñā, Upāya, Pranidhāna, Bala, Jñana and Vajrakarma. The author also deified the Dhāraṇīs which are a string of unmeaning words with a distinct sound effect. The Dhāraṇīs were usually memorized. Abhayākara Gupta selected twelve principal Dhāraṇīs and deifies them with human forms, colour and weapons. The following dhāraṇīs were deified in this category: Sumati, Ratnoloka, Uṣṇīṣavijaya, Mari, Parnaśabarī, Jāngulī, Anantamukhī, Cundā, Prajñāvardhanī,

¹³⁴ The *Niṣpannayogāvalī*, p. 67

Sarvakarmavaranaśodhani, Akṣayajñānakaranda and Sarvabuddhadharmākoṣavātī. The Dhāraṇī goddesses like Uṣṇīṣavijaya, Parṇaśabarī, Jāṅgulī and Cundā were widely represented in the stone and metal images which will be discussed in the next chapter.

The text also responded to Brahmanism in a very antagonistic manner. The noteworthy thing in the Maṇḍalas of the *Niṣpannayogāvalī* is that a large volume of Brahmanical deities found place in the Buddhist pantheon, although in a subordinate or sometimes humiliating position. In the *Sādhanamālā*, Parṇaśabarī and Aparājitā were presented as sitting on the Gaṇeśa. The four Brahmanical gods, Brahmā, Viṣṇu, Śiva and Indra have been designated uniformly as the four Māras or wicked beings and several Buddhist gods have been described as trampling them under their feet. Trailokyavijaya has been represented as trampling upon the prostrate forms of Śiva and Gaurī. The *Niṣpannayogāvalī* also continued the same attitude towards the Brahmanical deities. While describing the Herukamaṇḍala¹³⁵ the four attendant deities Gaurī, Caurī, Vetlālī and Ghasmārī were made to stand on the chest of Brahmā, Maheśvara, Ṣaḍvakra (Kartikeya), Indra, Kubera, Yama and Varuṇa. In the Saṃvaramaṇḍala¹³⁶ the principal god was made to stand upon the figures of the Brahmanical deities Bhairava and Kālarātri. In the Yogāmbaramaṇḍala¹³⁷ the Brahmanical deities like Hari, Brahmā, Maheśvara, Indra, Kubera, Yama and Varuṇa were given the position of gatekeeper. Bhattacharyya argues that the principal reason was the intention of the author to make Buddhism popular amongst the recently incorporated Hindu converts to Buddhism.

The *Niṣpannayogāvalī* in its several maṇḍalas presented three sets of Bodhisattvas one headed by Sāmantabhadra and other two by Maitreya. The Bodhisattva cult in Buddhist tantra proliferated as several new figures assumed the character of Bodhisattva. Abhayākara Gupta has mentioned sixteen such Bodhisattvas and divided them under three categories. These sixteen Bodhisattvas are Sāmantabhadra, Akṣayamati, Kṣitigarbha, Akaṣagarbha, Gaganagañja, Ratnapāṇi, Sāgaramati, Vajragarbha, Avalokiteśvara, Mahāsthāmaprāpta, Candraprabhā, Jaliniprabhā, Amitaprabhā, Pratibhānakuta, Sarvāśokatamonirghatamati, and Sarvānīvaranaviskambin. The description of the sixteen Bodhisattvas in the above order can be

¹³⁵The *Niṣpannayogāvalī*, p. 27

¹³⁶The *Niṣpannayogāvalī*, p. 33

¹³⁷The *Niṣpannayogāvalī*, p. 33

found in the Maṇḍala dedicated to Dharmadhātuvagiśvara.¹³⁸ The second list of Bodhisattvas headed by Maitreya occurred in the Maṇḍala dedicated to Mañjuvajra.¹³⁹ The list follows like this – Maitreya, Mañjuśrī, Gandhahasti, Jñānaketu, Bhadrāpāla, Sāgaramati, Akṣayamati, Pratibhānakuta, Mahāsthāmaprāpta, Sarvāpāyanjaha, Sarvāśokatamonirghatamati, Jāliniprabhā, Candraprabhā, Amitaprabhā, Gaganaganja, Sarvanivaranaviskambhin. The third list of sixteen Bodhisattvas occurs in the Maṇḍala of Dūrgatipariśodhana.¹⁴⁰ In this list the following names occur – Maitreya, Amoghadarśin, Apayanjaha, Sarvāśokatamonirghatamati, Gandhahasti, Surangama, Gaganaganja, Jñānaketu, Amṛtaprabha, Candraprabha, Bhadrāpāla, Jāliniprabhā, Vajragarbha, Akṣayamati, Pratibhānakuta, Sāmantabhadra.

Each of these Bodhisattvas has been described with multiple attributions. It is to be noted that none of them has assumed any homogeneous form and no strict rule has been followed to determine their Dhyānī Buddha family either. In different Maṇḍalas the Bodhisattvas have been described as having different colour, number of arms, the objects held by his hands and the Dhyānī Buddha he is identical with. For example, when Bodhisattva Sāmantabhadra appears in Akṣobhyamaṇḍala he has assumed the form of his Kuleśa Vajrasattva with three faces and six arms. In Vajramaṇḍala¹⁴¹ he has been described as the same form as Amoghasiddhi with Garuḍa vehicle and right hand in the Abhayamudrā. In the Dharmadhātuvagisvarimaṇḍala¹⁴² he has been described as yellow in colour, showing Varada in the right hand and a sword or lotus in the left. Again, in the Kālacakramaṇḍala¹⁴³ he is of blue colour and in the right hands he holds the vajra, knife and paraśu and in the left Ghanta, Kapāla and severed head of Brahmā. Similarly, in the case of Akṣayamati, he is described four times in the text. In one place Akṣayamati takes the same form as Amoghasiddhi with Abhayain the right and the left lying on the lap.¹⁴⁴ In another place he is yellow in colour, wielding sword in the right hand and exhibiting the Abhaya with lotus in the left.¹⁴⁵ In the third place he is described as golden in colour and his clenched left hand is held

¹³⁸ The Niṣpannayogāvalī, pp. 58-59

¹³⁹ The Niṣpannayogāvalī, p. 50

¹⁴⁰ The Niṣpannayogāvalī, pp. 66-67

¹⁴¹ The Niṣpannayogāvalī, p. 46

¹⁴² The Niṣpannayogāvalī, p. 58

¹⁴³ The Niṣpannayogāvalī, p. 85

¹⁴⁴ The Niṣpannayogāvalī, p. 46

¹⁴⁵ The Niṣpannayogāvalī, p. 58

against the chest with the varadā with rosary in the right hand.¹⁴⁶ In the fourth place he is white and with the two hands holds the bowl with the nectar of knowledge. In the same manner all the Bodhisattvas have been described in the text from minimum twice to maximum five times and their form, colour, weapons in the hand and number of arms are different in different maṇḍalas.

Thus, the heterogeneous forms of Bodhisattvas in different maṇḍalas leave us with utter confusion in order to identify them by a definite iconography. In different maṇḍalas the forms of the Bodhisattvas changed probably according to the central deity of the respective maṇḍala. Nevertheless, the sixteen Bodhisattvas in three different categories and their repeated mention in the text attest to the fact that they occupied a very significant place in the Buddhist pantheon. Strikingly though Avalokiteśvara and Mañjuśrī, the most important Bodhisattvas in the *Sādhanaṃālā*, have been mentioned only twice in the *Niṣpannayogāvalī*. Both Avalokiteśvara and Mañjuśrī feature only in Akṣobhyamaṇḍalam¹⁴⁷ and Dharmadhatuvagisvarimaṇḍalam.¹⁴⁸ Therefore, these deities for some reason were losing their prominence in *Niṣpannayogāvalī* and other Bodhisattvas took their place.

The *Niṣpannayogāvalī* is divided in twenty-six Maṇḍalas and in the contents it has been clearly stated. The Maṇḍala is a circle in which a large number of deities appear in smaller circles surrounding the principal deities. Generally, the central position is reserved for the principal deity and his companion appear in well-defined groups surrounding him in four cardinal directions and intermediary corners. This series is again followed by further circles in the same manner and are occupied by a group of companion deities. The first Maṇḍala is dedicated to Mañjuvajra while the last is dedicated to Kālacakra. In some of the Maṇḍalas like Dharmadhātuvagiśvarī and Kālacakra a large number of deities appear.

The twenty-six Maṇḍalas are

1. Mañjuvajra Maṇḍala,
2. Akṣobhya Maṇḍala,
3. Vajrasattva Maṇḍala,

¹⁴⁶ The *Niṣpannayogāvalī*, p. 50

¹⁴⁷ The *Niṣpannayogāvalī*, p. 6

¹⁴⁸ The *Niṣpannayogāvalī*, p. 54

4. Jñānadākīni Maṇḍala,
5. Hevajra Maṇḍala,
6. Nairātmā Maṇḍala,
7. Vajramṛta Maṇḍala,
8. Heruka Maṇḍala,
9. Mahāmāyā Maṇḍala,
10. Buddhakalpa Maṇḍala,
11. Vajrahumkāra Maṇḍala,
12. Samvara Maṇḍala,
13. Buddhakalpa Maṇḍala,
14. Yogāmbara Maṇḍala,
15. Yamāri Maṇḍala,
16. Vajratārā Maṇḍala,
17. Mārīcī Maṇḍala,
18. Pañcarakṣā Maṇḍala,
19. Vajradhātu Maṇḍala,
20. Mañjuvajra Maṇḍala,
21. Dharmadhātu-Vāgīśvara Maṇḍala,
22. Dūrgatipariśodhana Maṇḍala,
23. Bhutadamara Maṇḍala,
24. Pañcadāka Maṇḍala,
25. Sātcakravartī Maṇḍala and
26. Kālacakra Maṇḍala.

In the central position of all the maṇḍalas appears the deity to whom the maṇḍala is dedicated. Surrounding him there appear two or three circles which are occupied by subsidiary deities. The position of each of these deities are distinctively stated by mentioning their exact cardinal and intermediary corner. In the Mañjuvajra Maṇḍala the central deity Mañjuvajra is surrounded by ten deities like Yamāntaka in the east, Prajñāntaka in the south, Padmanataka in the west, Vighnantaka in the north, Takkirājā in the agni corner, Nilāndanda in the Nairṛta corner, Mahābala in the Vāyu corner, Acālā in the Isana corner, Uṣṇīsacakravartī in the above Sumbharājā in the Below. Mañjuvajra is also described to be attended by four Dhyānī Buddha in the inner

circle in the four cardinal corners and four Buddhaśaktis in the intermediate corners. In another circle appear six female deities in different directions like Rupavajra in the agni corner, Śabdavajra in the Nairṛta corner, Gandhavajra in the Vayu corner, Rasavajra in the Isana corner, Sparṣavajra in the east-north and Dharmadhātuvajra in the east-south. The Maṇḍala at the end evidently classifies the progenitors or heads of families of all the deities mentioned in the maṇḍala.

The text in some cases derived the concept of a maṇḍala from earlier texts of tantra and the author humbly mentioned that in the very title of the maṇḍala. The Akṣobhya Maṇḍala derived from the Pindikarma Tantra is recorded in the second chapter and Vajrasattva Maṇḍala extracted from the Śrī Samputa Tantra is described in the third chapter. Similarly in the fifth chapter the Hevajra Maṇḍala is acknowledged to be derived from Saptadaśātmaka and the Heruka Maṇḍala in the eighth chapter from Nabātmaka. Therefore, the text embodied a previous lineage of mandala tradition and it represents the ritual and literary legacy of a fairly long period.

Inclusion of innumerable female goddesses apart from the regular Sakti deities embraced by the principal male deities is of utmost importance since their names indicate that they were worshipped by the people of lower strata of the society. In Hevajra Maṇḍala, Nairātmā Maṇḍala and Heruka Maṇḍala there appeared some goddesses by the name of Śabarī, Candāli and Ḍombīni. Sabar, Candāl and Dom are the terms which are used to identify the lower caste community marginalized in Brahmanism and their professions are also considered to be of lower merit. The spectacular phenomenon of incorporating their goddesses within Buddhist pantheon is an important marker of not only inviting the lower caste people of Brahmanism to embrace Buddhism but also the extreme flexibility of tantrism in Buddhism to assimilate a new culture. It can also be surmised from here that though Buddhist tantra retained its principal epistemological tenets, its cultural medium of expression to the mass was deeply influenced and shaped by contemporary popular cults. To what extent did its ideologues allow the marginal cult in their core spiritual area is a matter of question, since their presence is only visible in the maṇḍalas of fearful semi-divine demon gods.

In the Pañcarakṣā Maṇḍala very significantly goddess Kālī found a place in the second circle in the Agni corner along with Kālarātri in Nairṛta corner, Kālakanthī in Vāyu corner and Mahayasa in Isana corner. Kali has been argued by some scholars as belonging to tribal/peripheral people and her cult has been incorporated in the Brahmanical Purana literature - Kālikapurāṇa

during the 8th-9th century CE.¹⁴⁹ Having Kālī in Buddhist pantheon also makes it evident that the same popular peripheral cults made their ways in Buddhism too. The religious process from the 8th to 12th centuries CE therefore was marked by the ardent drive to incorporate and assimilate the popular marginal cult within the fold of mainstream religious system and recognizing them though with caution. Both Brahmanism and Buddhism were drastically shaped by their contemporary popular cults which could hardly be ignored in order to penetrate among a larger marginal heterogeneous populace.

There are some really large maṇḍalas dedicated to Mañjuśrī and Kālacakra. The Dharmadhātu-Vagīśvarī Maṇḍala where the central deity is Mañjughoṣa, a form of Mañjuśrī with four faces and eight arms is the second largest maṇḍala after Kālacakra among the twenty-six. In the first circle of it there are eight Uṣṇīṣa deities, eight Dhyānī Buddhas and four gatekeepers. The second circle contains twelve Bhūmis twelve Pāramitās in south direction, twelve Dhāraṇī deities in northern direction and the gates of the circle are occupied by twelve Pratisamvits. In the third circle appear sixteen Bodhisattvas, four in each cardinal direction. The gates are occupied by ten Krodha deities and the corner of the circle is occupied by eight deities like Puṣpa, Dhūpa, Dīpa etc. In the fourth circle there are eight deities, four in the principal direction four other in the intermediary corners. Each of them has a distinctive vehicle. Beyond the fourth circle there is a regular congregation of deities mostly belonging to Brahmanism like Brahmā, Viṣṇu Maheśvara Karttikeya etc. There are also some Brahmanical female deities appearing in this Maṇḍala like Brāhmanī, Rudrānī, Vaiṣṇavi, Indrānī, Varāhi, Cāmundā. Nine planetary deities like Candra, Mangala, Budha, Rāhu ketu etc., eight serpent gods like Ananta, Vāsuli, Takṣaka etc., eight Asura kings like Vemacitri, Bali, Prahlāda etc., nine Yakṣa kings like Purnabhadra, Manibhadra, Dhanadā etc. and twenty-eight Nakṣatras like Aśvini, Bharāni, Kṛtika, Rohīni etc. also appear among the Brahmanical gods. Mañjuśrī, being the god of wisdom always was worshipped with reverence by the literate society and no wonder Abhayākaragupta as a Buddhist scholar devoted such a large Maṇḍala to him. Such complex Maṇḍala with a variety of subsidiary deities prove that in the monastic fold the ritualistic worship of Mañjuśrī underwent constant transformation and assumed a really complex form in the 12th century.

¹⁴⁹ Kunal Chakrabarti, *Religious Process and the Making of Bengal Purana*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, p. 170

The last Maṇḍala is devoted to Kālacakra who occupies a very important position in Kālcakrayāna. Bhattacharyya has argued that the Kālacakra or the circle of time as the highest god was set up by a particular section which wanted that the “Hindus should unite with the Buddhist under the common non-sectarian banner of the time god Kālacakra in order to present a united front against the cultural penetration of Semitic people which had already invaded Central Asia and Iran”¹⁵⁰. The maṇḍala is very complex and deity’s appearance is very peculiar with three necks, six shoulders, four faces and twelve principal arms and twenty-four thousand subsidiary hands. The Kālacakra Tantra is almost entirely in verse and the long commentary from where conceptualized its Maṇḍala is called Vimalaprabhā. The central deity Kālacakra is locked with in embrace with his Prajñā Viśvamāta. The god has been described as trampling Kāmadeva, Rudra, Rati and Gaurī. The total two hundred and six deities in his maṇḍala certainly prove that though it has been mentioned in the last chapter it nevertheless was an important maṇḍala.

3.8 The *Caryāpada*

In 1907, Haraprasad Sastri uncovered a collection of 50 Buddhist songs known as Caryāpada from the royal Durbar Library of Nepal. These songs, composed by various Siddhācāryas (ascetics with supernatural abilities), are the central focus of this text. However, there is some debate about the original title of the text, with Paṇḍit Vidhusekhara Bhattacharyya proposing it might be "Āścaryacaryāviniścaya."¹⁵¹ The original language of the Caryāpada is a form of proto-Bengali-Assamese-Oriya, while the commentary was written in Sanskrit. The text refers to the Caryā language as Sandhya Bhaṣa. Haraprasad Shastri has suggested that the use of metaphorical and symbolic language in the vernacular indicates it is a form of twilight language. This view is contested by Vidhushekhara Bhattacharyya, who argues that Sandhya denotes an intentional or implied sense. The Sanskrit commentary shows that "Abhisandhya" and "Sandhyay" are used interchangeably.¹⁵² Sukumar Sen proposed that the original text was titled

¹⁵⁰ The Niṣpannayogāvalī, p. 22

¹⁵¹ Vidhusekhara Bhattacharya, “Is it Caryācaryāviniścaya or Āścaryacaryāviniścaya”, *Indian Historical Quarterly*, 1930, 6: 170.

¹⁵² Prabodh Chandra Bagchi (ed.), *Caryāgīti-kosa of Buddhist Siddha*, Santiniketan: Visva Bharati, 1956, p. xii.

"Caryāgītikoṣa." The manuscript Shastri found was actually a copy of the commentary on the main text, which was authored by Munidatta, who is also referenced in the Tibetan translation.¹⁵³

After Sastri's discovery, Prabodh Chandra Bagchi subsequently discovered a complete Tibetan translation of the text.¹⁵⁴ The title and colophon of the Tibetan translation confirmed that the Sanskrit commentary of the *Caryāgītikoṣa* was composed by Munidatta and the Tibetan translation was done by Kīrttichandra and Chandrakīrti. The Tibetan translation, entitled *Caryāgītikoṣavṛtti*, mentions that it was originally an anthology of one hundred Caryā songs, from which Munidatta selected fifty for the understanding of the 'good people'.¹⁵⁵ The palm-leaf manuscript is now preserved in the National Archive of Nepal. There is total 69 folios at the time of Sastri's discovery, while at least six numbered folios along with the title folio were already lost. The scribe used old Bengali script both for the Bengali verses and corresponding Sanskrit commentary. However, the script and language also bear affinity with Eastern New Indo-Aryan languages like Assamese, Odia and Maithili. Tibetan translation of the Dohākoṣa, composed by Saraha, was discovered and collected by Rahula Sankrtayana from the Sakya Monastery in Tibet in 1934.¹⁵⁶ Sankrtayana published the Dohakosa in 1957. Such Dohākoṣas are also attributed to Kāṅha pā and Tilo pā. They are comprised of ecstatic mystical songs advocating bodily practices under the guidance of a guru.

Several of these authors are identified as mahāsiddhas in Abhayadattaśrī's *Caturaśīti-siddha-pravṛtti*.¹⁵⁷ This text explores the tradition and lives of 84 mahāsiddhas, most of whom hailed from eastern India regions like Magadha, Nālandā, Vaṅgāla, and Kāmarūpa. The names of these siddhas are derived from non-Sanskrit languages and are often associated with their trades, such as Tānti pā (weaver), Chamari pā (tannery worker), Kumori pā (potter), and Dhombī pā (washerman). Among the 84 mahāsiddhas, 20 are classified as shudras or lower-caste individuals. Some, like Dingkapa, a Brahmin royal council member, came from the royal class (Kshatriya). Despite his high status, Dingkapa had to sell wine and harvest rice to achieve spiritual liberation,

¹⁵³ Sukumar Sen, *Caryāgīti Padābalī* (in Bengali), Kolkata: Ananda Publishers, 2015, p. 15.

¹⁵⁴ Prabodh Chandra Bagchi (ed.), *Caryāgīti-kosa of Buddhist Siddha*, pp. i-v.

¹⁵⁵ Nilratan Sen, *Caryāgītikoṣa*, Simla: Indian Institute of Advanced Studies, 1977, p. xvi.

¹⁵⁶ Roger R. Jackson, *Tantric Treasures: Three Collection of Mystical Verse from Buddhist India*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 7.

¹⁵⁷ Alaka Chattopadhyay, *Churaśī Siddher Kāhinī* (A Bengali Translation of the Tibetan *Caturaśīti-Siddha-Pravṛtti*), Kolkata: Anustup, 2019, pp. 31–38.

as his biography indicates that he undertook lower-caste jobs to overcome the pride associated with higher caste status. Similarly, King Indrapāla became siddha Dārikpa after serving as a prostitute's servant and washing her feet. Many of these siddhas were taught by Ḍākinīs (semi-divine female figures) or yogīs. Judith Simmer-Brown describes the Ḍākinī in Tibetan Buddhism as representing "the formless wisdom of mind itself... a personification of Buddhahood."¹⁵⁸ In tantra culture, the Ḍākinī is recognized as a non-Brahmanical goddess with demonic attributes.¹⁵⁹ In the *Cakrasaṃvara Tantra*, the Ḍākinī is depicted as a female consort who assists yogīs in realizing the ultimate truth.

With the reference of the biographies of the Buddhist siddhas from the *Caturāśītisiddhapravṛtti* we can locate many of them in the early medieval Bengal and eastern India. A few of them being itinerant ascetics, migrated to the Buddhist sacred centers of eastern India from different places of the subcontinent. For example, Lui Pā travelled to Bodh Gaya and Pataliputra from the royal family of Sri Lanka.¹⁶⁰ Upon his arrival in Pātaliputra, he came across a dākinī in the guise of a courtesan who liberated him from his princely pride and guided him to defeat his prejudice. A fisherwoman gave him the name Lui pā which means eater of fish-guts. The birth-place of Viru pā was said to be the eastern province of Tripura during the time of Devapāla.¹⁶¹ He received his initiation and empowerment from the Dākinī Vajra Varāhī. He was expelled from the Somapura monastery for eating the meat of pigeon and chose the path of itinerant yogī. His disciple Dombī pā was a king of Magadha who was initiated in the mandalas of Hevajra. Similarly, the biographies of Tānti pā and Camari pā confirmed their eastern Indian origin and they were believed to have achieved siddha or miraculous power by the initiation of dākinī.¹⁶² Saraha or Rāhulabhadra was an arrow-maker disciple of a dākinī. It is difficult to locate him in precision, though his connection with Nalanda has been strongly suggested.¹⁶³ He is considered to be the greatest master of Indian Buddhist tantra creating the lineage of yoginī tantra practice. Both

¹⁵⁸ Judith Simmer-Brown, *Dakini's Warm Breath; The Feminine Principal in Tibetan Buddhism*, Boston: Sambhala, 2002, p. 9.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid, p. 46.

¹⁶⁰ Keith Dowman, *Masters of Mahāmudra: Songs and Histories of the Eighty-Four Buddhist siddhas*, New York: State University of New York Press, 1985, p. 33.

¹⁶¹ Ibid, p. 43.

¹⁶² Dowman, *Masters of Mahāmudra*, pp. 100-104.

¹⁶³ Ibid, p. 72.

Saraha and Śānti pā (Ratnakaraśānti) of Vikramśīla vihara belonged to the brahmana caste, but they took recourse to the degraded custom to come out of the Brahmanical orthodoxy.

The Caryāpada verses include the names of their composers, with around 25 authors identified, some of whom also appear in the Tibetan Bstan-'gyur/Tanjur. However, the identities of these authors remain unclear. Sukumar Sen proposed that names ending in 'pā,' such as 'aisancaryākukkuripāegāiu' found in Kukkuripāda's caryā, were likely composed by disciples, given the respectful mention of these names.¹⁶⁴ The authors of the caryās are occasionally referenced in other yogic traditions as well. For instance, the Sanskrit text Amṛitasiddhi, a Haṭhayoga work, is attributed to Virupa or Virūpākṣa in Tibetan tradition.¹⁶⁵ The unique practices and principles described in Amṛitasiddhi (11th century) are closely associated with Vajrayāna Buddhism. Tibetan hagiography of Virūpākṣa reveals that he spent his early years in eastern India before becoming active in the Deccan and southern regions. Similarly, another caryā composer, Tilo pā, is mentioned in Tibetan hagiography as originating from Zahor in Bengal.¹⁶⁶ His name is also linked to a text called Acintyamahāmudrā, where he is noted for converting eight people. The identity of Kāṇha, who composed 13 caryās, remains unclear. Matthew Kapstein suggested that Kāṇha should be viewed as an inspirational figure within the tradition rather than a specific individual.¹⁶⁷ After reviewing a Dohākoṣa attributed to him in the Tibetan extracanonical collection *Do ha mdzodbrgyad*, he proposed that the Caryāgīti and Doha verses translated into Tibetan are not literal translations but rather products of ongoing improvisation in Tibet, which he termed as 'Grey Texts'.

The central concept of Caryāpada is often referred to as Sahajayāna or the Buddhist Sahajīyā cult. However, as Per Kvaerne has pointed out, caution is needed when using these terms, as there is no textual evidence for a distinct yāna of this nature in Buddhist tantra.¹⁶⁸ The idea of sahaja in Buddhist tradition was not introduced by the Caryāgītikōśa but appeared in earlier tantra

¹⁶⁴ Sukumar Sen, *Caryāgīti Padābalī*, p. 21.

¹⁶⁵ James Mallinson, 'Kālavañcana in the Konkan: How a Vajrayāna Haṭhayoga Tradition Cheated Buddhism's Death in India', *Religion*, 2019, 10 (223): 2–3.

¹⁶⁶ Fabrizio Torricelli, *Tilopā: A Buddhist Yogi of the Tenth Century*, Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, (undated), p. 127.

¹⁶⁷ Matthew Kapstein, 'Dohās and Grey Texts, Reflections on a Song Attributed to Kāṇha', in Charles Ramble and Hanna Havnevik (eds), *From Bhakti to Bon: Festschrift for Per Kvaerne*, Norway: Institute for Comparative Research in Human Culture, 2015, p. 292.

¹⁶⁸ Per Kvaerne, 'On the Context of Sahaja in Indian Buddhist Tantric Literature', *Temenos*, 1975, 11: 88.

texts. The term Sahaja was first used as a technical term in Buddhajñāpada in the early 9th century and later discussed as one of the four ‘joys’ in the Hevajra Tantra from the late 9th or early 10th century.¹⁶⁹ Subsequently, Buddhist poets in the Dohākoṣa and Caryāgīti used the term to describe the ultimate experience of sexual practice. In the 10th century, Indrabhuti adopted the term, and by the early 11th century, it was integrated into the Kālacakra Tantra and contributed to the development of new doctrines such as sahajakāyā. Various scholars, including Cecil Bendall, Shahidullah, Shashibhusan Dasgupta, David Snellgrove, H.V. Guenther, and Carelli, have defined the term based on their specific texts.¹⁷⁰ In the context of Caryāpada, the term underwent a transformation from referring to a consecration ceremony called prajñāṣeka and one of the four joys (ānanda, paramānanda, viramānanda, and sahajānanda) to denoting an intrinsic state of mind and body essential for attaining salvation. Caryāpada is characterized by its philosophical exploration of illusion, which, according to Shashibhusan Dasgupta, blends Madhyamaka, Yogacara, and Vedantic philosophies.¹⁷¹ Additionally, Caryāpada addresses the doctrine of śūnya, described in four types: śūnya, Ati-śūnya, Maha-śūnya, and Sarva-śūnya, as articulated in the songs of Dhendanpāda, Dārikapāda, Kāṇha, and others.¹⁷²

In the Caryāpada, the Siddhācārya express a clear disdain for complex scholarly learning, repeatedly rejecting the notion that scriptural knowledge is superior.¹⁷³ Luipā’s songs advocate for liberation through meditation and yoga as taught by a guru, who is viewed as an extension of oneself. This represents a shift from valuing adherence to scriptural doctrines to emphasizing personal devotion to human or superhuman teachers.¹⁷⁴ The Caryāpada critiques the practice of severe physical practices of asceticism, highlighting instead the smooth transcendence of the soul for achieving salvation. It likens extravagant yogis to chariot riders who move from one dock to another but fail to cross the ordinary river. Tilopāda’s verses asserted that ultimate truth can only be fully realized through personal experience and cannot be grasped by scholars.¹⁷⁵ Kāṇha’s

¹⁶⁹ Ronald M. Davidson, “Reframing Sahaja: Genre, Representation, Ritual and Lineage”, *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, 2002, Vol. 30, p. 46.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid, pp. 48–52.

¹⁷¹ Dasgupta, *Obscure Religious Cult*, p. 41.

¹⁷² Ibid., pp. 51–54.

¹⁷³ Dasgupta, *Obscure Religious Cult*, pp. 60–62. Here Dasgupta has brilliantly pointed out the sheer apathy of the Siddhacaryas for the conventional scholarship who preached scriptures.

¹⁷⁴ Sen, *Caryāgīti Padābāṇī*, p. 53.

¹⁷⁵ *Jo mana-goarapaitthai so paramatthanahonti*, song no. 9.

composition, in caryā no. 40, criticizes conventional scholars for their superficial engagement with āgama, Vedic, and Purāṇic texts, comparing them to bees that circle ripe fruit but gain nothing of substance.¹⁷⁶ Similarly, Saraha's dohā argued that those who continuously recite and interpret texts cannot grasp the truth, which remains both unknown and unknowable to them.¹⁷⁷ It was further contended that scholars may discuss scriptures but lacked awareness of the Buddha residing within their own bodies, meaning their knowledge cannot free them from the cycle of rebirth. The Caryāpada emphasizes the body as a microcosm of the universe, with significant focus placed on kāyā (body)-Sādhana, or yogic practices, to prepare the body for higher realization. Kāṇhapāda's song suggests using the five Tathāgatas as oars to navigate the body and escape the illusions of existence. This metaphor of the body as a boat and a pure mind as the oar, guiding the journey toward truth, is a recurring theme in the Caryā songs.

Achieving bodhicitta, or a state of blissful mind, involves an internal transformation in the Caryāpada. This was attained through persistent meditation on śūnya (emptiness) and mastery over the nerves.¹⁷⁸ Unlike other traditions, Caryāpada does not trace its methods back to the Buddha but instead emphasizes the role of siddha personalities. The religious culture depicted in the Caryāpadas encompassed diverse range of yoga practices of tantrism. The collection of the caryās presented as an anthology represent various traditions. A detailed examination of the caryās reveals a mixture of Buddhist schools of thought, including those aligned with different tantra paths such as Sahajayāna, Mantrayāna, and Vajrayāna. The caryās also show some connections with Śaiva Siddhas, Nātha Siddhas, and the Baul community. For instance, a caryā by Kāṇha imagines dombī as his own consort and refers to the Kāpālika Yogīs, thus the social symbolism in the verse covered a wide society, of the lokāyata and mystic worlds. Interestingly, some composers used the term 'nātha' to denote the supreme guru. This trend sets us thinking in terms of the possibility of connections with the later emerging Nātha mysticism. The esoteric ideas expressed in these Buddhist dohās eventually influenced various heterodox religious sects in Bengal which emerged in the medieval and early modern eastern region, collectively known later as the Sahajiyā

¹⁷⁶ Sen, *CaryāgītiPadābañī*, p. 72.

¹⁷⁷ Dasgupta, *Obscure Religious Cult*, p. 61.

¹⁷⁸ Prabodh Chandra Bagchi (ed.), *Caryāgīti-koṣa of Buddhist Siddha*, Santiniketan: Visva Bharati, 1956, p. xiii.

tradition. This tradition became widely prevalent among later dervishes, fakirs, bauls, auls, saints, and other wandering heterodox groups.¹⁷⁹

The mystical ecstatic path of the sahajīyās attainable through the guidance of a preceptor – as laid down in the dohas probably set the tone for subsequent movements of devotionism and Sufi mysticism. The caryā and the dohā songs still serve as the models for conception of Newari Buddhism according to some scholars.¹⁸⁰ With time these songs emerged as symbolic of the powerful and compassionate aspects of Buddhist tantra, especially among the Buddhist communities of Tibet, Sikkim, Bhutan and Ladakh. The siddha tradition must not be seen as an isolated Indian regional phenomenon however. Their possible historical connection with the Chinese Chan masters has been brought to our attention by a few scholars.¹⁸¹ They were primarily the non-sectarian wandering yogīs who appropriated various religious ideas and expressed their disdain against religious orthodoxy.

Conclusion

The Buddhist texts of early medieval Bengal were a complex repository of various kinds of abstract ritualistic ideas. They were characterized by heterogenous idealistic and ritualistic traditions, often coming from anonymous writers. Each of these texts was representative of varied idealistic tenets of Buddhist tantra. The tradition of these texts continued for centuries through numerous commentaries and subsequent or ancillary literature. Tantric Buddhism can be regarded as an umbrella terminology under which many of the Buddhist philosophical strands of thought like Vajrayāna, Kālacakrayāna and Sahajayāna evolved. All the texts under survey represent a long tradition of Buddhism in early medieval greater Bengal as they underwent centuries of additions and redactions. In this process we can track how different Mahāyāna ideas came to be modified and reinterpreted in the tantric parlance, arriving at a stage of maturity which we observe in the context of early medieval Bengal.

The texts show the different chronological phases of development of tantric characteristics within Buddhism. The roots can be traced through the early texts including the *Prajñāpāramitā*

¹⁷⁹ Huge B. Urban, *Economics of Ecstasy: Tantra, Secrecy and Power in Colonial Bengal*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 35.

¹⁸⁰ Jackson, *Tantric Treasures*, p. 6.

¹⁸¹ Ibid, pp. 1-6

(1st century BCE), the *Pañcarakṣā* (2nd – 6th century CE) and the *Mahāmāyūrī-Vidyārājñī-Sūtra* (possibly 6th century CE) which reveal a long and gradual process of absorption and creation of ideas and characteristics which can be considered as marking the beginnings of tantra orientation in the rituals and ideas within Mahāyāna Buddhism. The tradition of the *Prajñāpāramitā* literature witnessed multiple phases of development from the 1st century BCE to the 12th century CE. In the last phase (600-1200 CE) of development the tradition, the text was reduced to a shorter version and was deified as a goddess who was invoked through rituals that were oriented to tantrism. The text of the *Guhyasamājatantra* (5th century CE) showed the formative stage of tantra where certain mystical features started to gain foothold in the Mahāyāna. It is in the *Guhyasamājatantra* that we first come across a Buddhist pantheon where male deities were accompanied by their female consorts. The intermediary phase showed gradual consolidation of the tantric rituals like maṇḍala and mantra and the rise of a complex ritual system. The *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa* (7th century CE) and the *Tārāmūlakalpa* (7th century CE) marked the beginning of full efflorescence while the *Hevajratantra* (8th century CE) and the *Cakrasaṃvaratantra* (8th century CE) indicate the culmination of this phase of development of tantra within Buddhism. The *Hevajratantra* and the *Cakrasaṃvaratantra* exhibit the rise of wrathful Buddhist deities like Hevajra and Saṃvara. These icons rose from marginality to prominence. This last phase was also characterized by the compilation of scattered rituals embedded in the sādhanas and caryās into the anthologies like the *Sādhnamālā* (11th century) and the *Caryāpada* (12th century). Buddhist pantheon saw proliferation and the entire Buddhist maṇḍala was deified in the process as we find in the *Nispannayogavāli*. The *Caryāpada* on the other hand embodied the garnering of idealism into symbolic connection with the grassroots. The abstract idealism of tantra penetrated into the vernacular medium at the same time and probably absorbed elementary component from there.

The anthologies like the *Sādhnamālā* and the *Caryāpada* were compiled almost at the same period, yet they represent two completely different idealistic and ritualistic variants of the Buddhist tantra. The *Sādhnamālā* offered the rules for ritualistic worship of different Buddhist deities in compliance with the established Buddhist norms. The *Caryāpada*, on the other hand, expressed vehement opposition against the Buddhist orthodoxy in non-conformist tone. The verses advocated for embracing the innate nature of human being to attain the highest truth. The adoption of vernacular language and rendering of the verses into musical composition signified that the Buddhist tantra was gradually making its way to surreal esoteric devotional practices almost like

the strains of Bhakti noted in southern Śaivism and Vaiṣṇavism. This tendency may have paved the way to the regional vernacular terrain through the culture of wandering mystiques. The adoption of the language, identified as proto-Bengali – Odiya – Assamese for composing the dohās probably reflect this connection. It was also probably reflecting the spoken language of the wider region and thus created a bridge between literate textual culture and oral devotional strains. This tradition later found its way into a wide variety of devotional traditions and seems to have been absorbed into the mystique communities of baul, aul and sufi.

To come to the material remains, the evidence of many of the ritualistic texts discussed above can be substantially aligned with the regional Buddhist sculptures and manuscript illustrations. In the next chapter we shall survey the Buddhist images and paintings especially characterizing the element of tantra within Buddhism in the period concerned and thereby endeavour to understand the characteristics of Buddhist tantra in our context.

CHAPTER FOUR

Buddhist Images: Locating the Visual-Physical Evidence for Tantrism

The sculpted images found in the select context of research prove to be the most crucial visible remains of the culture and practice of tantrism within Buddhism. A vast number of Buddhist images are preserved in the different museums of the region identified as greater Bengal in this research. We shall however focus on some of those images that bear the characteristics of tantra. Along with the stone and metal sculptures, we shall also survey the painted manuscripts as these are directly traceable to the monastic culture of early medieval greater Bengal. We shall make an attempt to tease out their religious and cultural significance in the given thematic frame. The images are probably the only source, unlike texts, which have not undergone any change since their creation. Not much study has been conducted by the scholars of Buddhist tantra on unravelling the characteristics of this huge durable body of source. These sculptures possess immense potential for understanding the nuances of evolving conceptions of spiritualism and devotional focus. Looking at the texts alone, in separation from these and other categories (vihāras) of archaeological evidence, entails the risk of missing out on important clues to understanding the emergent ideas within Buddhism, including tracing the path of tantrism. The images can be considered as the material representation of the divine ideas embedded in the texts. We shall attempt to study specific images and their significance by contextualising them in the ritual and ideological background.

4.1 Buddhist pantheon in the early medieval context

The artistic style and uniformity represented in the huge corpus of images from Bengal distinguish it from other such groups from different regions and have been given the epithet of ‘Eastern Indian School of Art’. Art historians like Rakhaldas Bandyopadhyay in 1933 and Susan Huntington in 1984 have used the terms “Eastern Indian School of Medieval Sculpture” and “Pāla-Sena School of Art” respectively as the titles of their monographs which signify their acknowledgment of a specific regional tradition of sculptural art. If we are to believe the account of the 17th century Tibetan chronicler Lama Tāranātha, the regional school sculptural art was

established during the reign of the second and the third Pāla rulers, Dharmapāla and Devapāla by a father and son duo, Dhīman and Bitopāla.¹

It is rather difficult to predict the origin of the Buddhist pantheon, but it is primarily constituted of the family of five Dhyānī Buddha or kuleśa who were the heirs of Ādi Buddha and Ādi Prajñā.² The earliest mention of some Buddhist gods and goddesses was found in the *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa* (7th century CE) and the idea of a pantheon was systematically classified in the *Guhyasamājantra* (5th – 6th centuries). It is in the *Guhyasamājantra* that we first come across the names of five Dhyānī Buddhas, their mantras and maṇḍalas and their female counterparts. The Dhyānī Buddhas represent the five skandhas or cosmic elements by which the universe was thought to be composed. As they were the progenitors of all other Buddhist Gods and Goddesses representing their own family, they were also called kuleśa.³ These five Dhyānī Buddhas are Amitābha, Akṣobhya, Vairocana, Ratnasambhava and Amoghasiddhi. In the *Sādhanamālā* Amitābha is described as seated in Vajraparyāṅkāśana mudrā, Akṣobhya in Samādhi-bhūsparśa mudrā, Vairocana in bhūmisparśa-bodhyāṅgī mudrā, Ratnasambhava in Dharmacakra-varadā mudrā and Amoghsiddhi in abhaya mudrā. The *Sādhanamālā* also provides the respective colours for each Dhyānī Buddha⁴ while *Niṣpannayogāvalī* provides the direction and vehicle of each Buddha.⁵ Among the five Dhyānī Buddhas, Akṣobhya was very significant in eastern India and Vairocana in Nepal.⁶ Along with five cosmic or Dhyānī Buddha there were two more Ādi Buddhas – Vajrasattva and Vajraḍhara. Both hold two vajras and a ghaṇṭā while embracing their Prajñā. Though it has been a wide practice among the scholars of Buddhist iconography to term these five primordial Buddhas as Dhyānī Buddha, objection has been raised by Gouriswar Bhattacharya who argued that nowhere in the *Sādhanamālā* and the

¹ Lama Chimpa, Aloka Chattopadhyay, *Tāranātha's History of Buddhism in India*, New Delhi: Manohar, 1990, p. 38

² Nalini Kanta Bhattasali, *Iconography of Buddhist and Brahmanical Sculptures in the Dacca Museum*, Dhaka: Dhaka Museum Committee, 1929, p. 16

³ Benoytosh Bhattacharya, *Indian Buddhist Iconography*, Calcutta: Firma KLM, 1958, p. 32

⁴ The *Sādhanamālā*, p. 50

⁵ The *Niṣpannayogāvalī*, p. 77

⁶ Gouriswar Bhattacharya, "Tantric Buddhist Images", in Stanley Wolpart (ed), *Encyclopedia of India*, Vol. 4, p. 135.

Niṣpannayogāvalī have they been named so.⁷ Rather he argued that they should be called five Transcendent Buddhas or Pañca-Tathāgatas.

The elaborate Buddhist pantheon indicates that in the place of Śākyamuni Buddha who had attained both bodhi and nirvāṇa, there emerged a whole range of Bodhisattvas who had attained bodhi but had postponed nirvāṇa to assist others with their compassion in attaining enlightenment. The Dhyānī Buddhas and five Bodhisattavas who were widely worshipped in several parts of early medieval greater Bengal. The Dhyānī Buddha Amitābha was held as the ancestor of the human Buddha Gautama and the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara. These Buddhas and Bodhisattvas were worshipped through a diagram in the shape of a circle or maṇḍala. Mahāpaṇḍita Abhayākaragupta offered elaborate descriptions of such maṇḍalas in the *Niṣpannayogāvalī* (12th century). Evidence points to the emergence of the cult of maṇḍala in the later part of the period under consideration.

4.2 Region - wise Survey of the relevant Sculptures

We shall focus mainly on the icons such as Heruka, Hevajra, Pretasantarpita Lokeśvara, Cundā, Sitātapatrā etc., which can be identified with the tantra characteristics, while the Mahāyāna figures like Avalokiteśvara and Tārā have been surveyed especially as they begin to attain curious tantra features which started appearing from the 8th century CE onwards. The sculptures are not only marked by the regional stylistic tradition but also reveal local stylistic difference. The difference in style is not only the result of different artistic traditions but also different social, religious and political conditions extant in specific subregions. The pre – eminence enjoyed by Magadha, being the center of Buddhist religious activities since the 5th century BCE lent the sculptures of the area a distinct character which is absent in the case of sculptures found in the Buddhist sites of eastern Bengal. Though political control over Magadha shifted from one ruling dynasty to another, it remained central in the Buddhist sacred landscape and was continuously visited by pilgrims. Magadha was turned into the most vital center of Mahāyāna Buddhism with the advent of the Pāla rulers. With the spectacular development of the vihāras in Nālandā, Kurkihar, Antichak and Odantapura the entire Magadhan sector emerged as the throbbing ground

⁷ Bhattacharya, “Tantric Buddhist Images”, p.350

of Buddhist activity. Apart from the Kashmir-Gāndhāra region⁸ there was probably no other centre of Mahāyāna in the Indian subcontinent which yielded so many images, among which especially the tantra images were found in the Magadha circle. As mentioned already the sculptural art of the region bore distinct traits. The northern part of ancient Bihar which formed the Tirabhukti region was also deeply impacted by the stylistic characteristics of Magadhan art while retaining marks of regionality.

The springboard of Buddhist theories and iconography extended into eastern India from Magadha. Production of art here was primarily generated by political patronage to the religious institutions. The stone sculptures from western Bengal can roughly be dated only up to the 10th century CE in the Pāla period while those of eastern Bengal continued to be produced in large numbers up to the 12th century. Susan Huntington noted a shift in the geographical centre for art activity. According to Huntington this was due to the general south-eastern mobility of the later Pālas, who were driven by the raids of the Pratihāras and Gāhaḍavālas and other competing dynasties.⁹ The other reason could have been due to the fact that Buddhism was gradually losing its base to Brahmanism in northern India. Looking at the empirical evidence, we find that Brahmanical images outnumbered the Buddhist images between 10th and 12th centuries CE. Huntington had argued that with the dwindling influence of Buddhism, the hold over Magadha was lost and the regional Buddhist art suffered. We must note that royal patronage by itself cannot account as the only factor behind the production of such huge numbers of Buddhist images. The circuit of patronage was wider and we have to hypothesize about the presence of larger circles of patrons among general populace. Moreover, the rising tantra practices in both Buddhism and Brahmanism, especially visible in the worship of dākīnis, may be primarily considered to have borne links with grassroot cults which were gradually appropriated by the mainstream religions. These cults therefore did not rest upon the patronage of the rulers and rather developed independently with their subregional and local characteristics. So, the shift of the political center

⁸ For the Buddhist images of this region see Gouriswar Bhattacharya, "Buddha Śākyamuni and Pañca Tathāgatas: Dilemma in Bihar-Bengal", in Karen Frifelt and Per Sorensen (eds), *South Asian Archaeology*, London, 1985, pp. 350-371

⁹ Susan L. Huntington, *The "Pala-Sena" Schools of Sculpture*, Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1984, p. 82

to the east during the rule of later Pālas may explain the unprecedented increase in the number of Buddhist images in eastern part of our select geographical area.

4.3.1 Bodh Gaya

While the Buddha was most commonly represented with the Dharmacakra mudrā in the Gupta period, the most popular theme in the Pāla period was the defeat of Māra by Buddha, where the Buddha is shown seated under the leaves of the Bodhi tree with his right hand in the Bhūmisparśa mudrā. This change in the emphasis of religious language may indicate a shift of the importance from Sārnāth to Bodh Gaya. However, it is also noted that with the rise of Tantrism in, Bodh Gaya became less important to some schools of Buddhist thought than the other religious sites such as Nālandā and Vikramśīla which became prominent from the 11th century onwards.¹⁰ The tantric trends may have found resistance in Bodh Gaya as Theravāda and Mahāyāna were active in this area till the 8th century CE. Individuals or groups who were more inclined toward the Vajrayāna ideas were probably attracted to the monasteries or universities in Nālandā and Vikramśīla. This becomes evident when we look to the abundance of sculptures with tantra orientation at places like Nālandā and Vikramśīla, while paucity of the tantra material is noted at Bodh Gaya of the same period. The majority of the sculptures at Bodh Gaya do not exhibit the tantra features found at other sites. Absence of the myriad attendant figures, accentuated poses and elaborate ornamentations which distinguished the tantra traits in the images were more visible in eastern parts of the region under study.

About 13 figures of the Buddha were listed by Huntington among the stone and metal images from Bodh Gaya. These appeared between the 4th, 5th and 7th centuries CE. It is quite logical to not expect any tantrayāna images so early. This phenomenon can be typically found to appear on the scene from the 8th century CE onwards. A very important image of Trailokyavijaya from the 10th century CE was found at Bodh Gaya which requires our attention. We find the following description about him in the *Sāadhanamālā*: "... He stands in pratyālīḍha posture, tramples upon the head of Maheśvara with his left leg while the right presses upon the bosom of Gaurī."¹¹ Emanating from Akṣobhya, Trailokyavijaya is terrible in appearance and his provenance in Bodh

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 96

¹¹ Benoytosh Bhattacharyya (ed), *Sāadhanamālā*, p. 511

Gaya with its anti-Brahmanical features bear special significance. The Gaya district yielded simultaneous evidence of landgrant made by the Pāla ruler Nayapāladeva to the Brāhmaṇas for constructing temples in 1038 CE.¹² This indicates that Brahmanical influence was rising in Gaya perhaps compelling the adoption of stronger attempts by the Buddhists to reclaim their hold on the holiest place of Buddhism. The image of Trailokyavijaya in the 10th century is significant in this context. Correspondingly we come across two striking images of Maitreya from the 10th and 12th centuries which are important among the corpus of images from Bodh Gaya. Maitreya has been mentioned several times in *Niṣpannayogāvalī*. In the Mañjuvajra Maṇḍala of the *Niṣpannayogāvalī* other Bodhisattvas are headed by him.¹³ The *Niṣpannayogāvalī* states “Maitreya has four hands and is of golden colour. With the two principal hands he shows the dharmacakra Mudrā. The other two hands show the varadā mudrā in the right and a twig of nāgakeśara with flower in the left.”¹⁴ The representation of the future Buddha in Bodh Gaya is very significant since it reflects the longing of the followers of Buddhist tantra for another Buddha to grace the world. The dharmacakra mudrā of Maitreya like Śākyamuni Buddha reflects the role of turning the wheel of law like his predecessor. Thus, we find the gradual efflorescence of the Mahāyāna towards tantra orientations in the images which are also reflected in the emerging tantra texts.

4.3.2 Kurkihar

Cunningham associated Kurkihar with Kukkaṭapada Vihāra which has been mentioned by both Faxian and Xuanzang.¹⁵ His basis for the identification is the association of a three-peaked hill several kilometers north of Kurkihar as the cock’s foot hill (Kukkaṭa-pada) described by the two Chinese travelers upon which Kashyapa was described to have attained nirvāṇa. S.K. Saraswati and K.C. Sarkar disagreed with Cunningham in identifying Kurkihar as Kukkaṭapada Vihāra.¹⁶ In spite of these arguments, Kurkihar seems to have been an important centre of Buddhism from the time of Faxian (4th century) and Xuanzang (7th century). The sculptures

¹² S.K. Maity and Ramaranjan Mukherjee, *Corpus of Bengal Inscription*, Calcutta: Punthi Pustak, 1967, p. 141

¹³ Bhattacharyya (ed.), *The Sādhanamālā*, Vol. I, p. 93

¹⁴ Benoytosh Bhattacharyya (ed), *The Niṣpannayogāvalī*, p. 66

¹⁵ Alexander Cunningham, *Archaeological Survey Reports*, Vol. XV, p. 5.

¹⁶ S.K. Saraswati and K.C. Sarkar, *Kurkihar, Gaya and Bodh Gaya*, Rajshahi, 1936, p. 3

unearthed from the place however do not seem to date prior to the 9th century CE. Huntington assumed that a sculpture workshop existed on this site since the style of sculpting reflected in the images from around Kurkihar region is rather consistent.¹⁷ Of the several Buddha images the crowned and seated examples seem to represent a special Kurkihar format. Several similar stone sculptures, some in situ at Kurkihar and others presently in Museum collection, show the Buddha displaying bhūmisparśa mudrā while seated upon a rather elaborate throne.

Kurkihar yields a significant number of crowned Buddha images of utmost significance. The crowned Buddha or Ādi Buddha as identified by Nanigopal Majumder essentially represents the royal character of the Buddha rather than his spiritual character before attaining bodhi. The worship of the crowned Buddha is exceptional among the followers of the Mahāyāna especially those who lived in the monastic fold. Thirty images out of fifty-one in the whole hoard of metal images unearthed from Kurkihar are of crowned Buddha.¹⁸ If we are to believe Cunningham that it was the famous Kukkuṭapāda Vihāra, the provenance of such images represents a peculiar trend of practice among the inhabitants of the monastery.

Two important images of Vasudhārā, both from 10th century CE need to be dealt with special significance. The *Sādhanamālā* provides the following description about Vasudhārā: "... she appears as a young girl of twice eight years, exhibits the Varada Mudrā in the right hands, carries the ears of corn in the left, and bears the image of Akṣobhya on the crown."¹⁹ The ears of corn in the iconography of Vasudhārā are an important signifier of her role as a goddess of fertility. The major characteristic of Vasudhārā links its utmost significance for the common people who desire prosperity. Moreover, the deity is the consort of Jambhala, the God of wealth, an emanation from Avalokiteśvara, who was also very popular among the laity who aspired for material well-being. The latter is an evolved form from the early historic times. Both were conceptualized in a trajectory of Buddhist pantheon from Mahāyāna to tantra orientations.

The image of Cuṇḍā in Kurkihar from 11th century is special since she is one of the few goddesses in the pantheon who emanates from Dhyānī Buddha Vairocana. Where most of the Buddhist Gods and Goddesses in Bihar belonged to the family of Akṣobhya, Cuṇḍā represents an

¹⁷ Huntington, *The "Pala-Sena" Schools of Sculpture*, p. 103

¹⁸ Saraswati and Sarkar, *Kurkihar, Gaya and Bodh Gaya*, p. 9

¹⁹ Bhattacharyya (ed), *Sādhanamālā*, p. 421.

exceptional character. In the *Niṣpannayogāvalī* it appears that the deity Cuṇḍā is the embodiment of the Cuṇḍādhāraṇī to which a reference has been made by Śāntideva.²⁰ *Niṣpannayogāvalī* acknowledges twelve dhāraṇī deities among whom Uṣṇīsavijaya, Jāngulī, Parṇasābarī and Cuṇḍā are important.²¹ Cuṇḍā has figured in the Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa (200 CE), Guhyasamājantra (300 CE), Śikkhasamuccaya of Śāntideva (7th century) and the Prajñāpāramitā MSS of 11th century CE, besides being mentioned in the *Niṣpannayogāvalī* (1130 CE)²². Cuṇḍā has been included as a minor deity in the Aṣṭabhūja-Kurukulla of *Sādhanamālā*²³ where she is described as four-armed holding a book and showing Varada Mudrā with her two left hands while her two right hands hold bowl.

In contrast to the sites like Nālandā and Bodh Gaya where Brahmanical images are found in significant numbers along with Buddhist ones, Kurkihar does not show evidence of having been a major producer of non-Buddhist images. The few Brahmanical pieces that have been found are metal works.

4.3.3 Nālandā

Nālandā yielded the largest number of Buddhist images than any other sites of Bengal. Being a very rich place for Buddhist activity during the Pāla period, Nālandā has left a deep imprint on the cultural activity of its surrounding regions. At least five images of Khasarpaṇa Avalokiteśvara and four of Avalokiteśvara were found from Nālandā, mostly belonging to 12th century CE. Avalokiteśvara is the most prominent Bodhisattava in the whole of Buddhist pantheon as he is found in multiple numbers from all the important Buddhist sites of Bengal and Bihar. About 38 Sādhanās have been attributed to him in the *Sādhanamālā*.²⁴ Avalokiteśvara sometimes is hailed with the suffice Ísvara, which may indicate a reaction to the powers of the Brahmanical God Śiva. Indeed, in some instances from Maharastra and Kashmir region the image of Avalokiteśvara bears jaṭā and akṣamālā which are common features of Śiva.²⁵ Avalokiteśvara, the

²⁰ Bhattacharyya (ed), *Niṣpaṇṇayogāvalī*, p. 57

²¹ Ibid, p. 220.

²² Ibid, p. 221.

²³ Bhattacharyya (ed), *Sādhanamālā*, p. 271.

²⁴ G. Bhattacharyya, “Vāsudeva-Viṣṇu-Padmapāṇi and Avalokiteśvara-Śiva” in R.C. Sharma (ed), *Interaction Between Brahmanical and Buddhist Art*, New Delhi, p. 95

²⁵ Ibid, p. 96

universal God of compassion, was the most popular deity worshipped by the monks as well as the common people. The wide availability of images of Avalokiteśvara during the Pāla period in the vicinity of the vibrant religious and political centers of Nālandā and Patna indicate the veneration for a compassionate deity among both the inmates of the Buddhist establishments and the lay people.

The images of Harītī and Tārā from Nālandā and Patna, traced as early as 9th century CE, indicate emergent cultural practices. A figure of Tārā came from the 25th regnal year of Devapāla from Hilsa in the Patna region.²⁶ The image inscription mentions the name of Mañjuśrīdeva, famous teacher at Nālandā and the donor, the devout Buddhist worshipper Gāndhāra. The image is of special interest from the points of both artistic style and iconographic features. Very striking is the fact that she wears two types of earrings which is an early sign of dating the Pāla images, the like of which disappeared from Bengal and Bihar in post 9th century phase. The whole back plate of the image has been treated as *prabhamaṇḍala* with a design of flame which is quite unusual. She is accompanied by a pair of female and male figures seated in different postures. The four-armed female figure has been identified as Ekajaṭā and the male figure as Hayagrīva.²⁷ Ekajaṭā has been described as both a corresponding female form of Saṃvara and of Blue Tārā.²⁸ As an attending figure Ekajaṭā is described with two arms and holding katri and kapāla (Sādhanā 91 and 116) and as an independent deity she is described in Sādhanās 123, 125, 126 and 127. But the *Sādhanamālā* does not give any description of Tārā with Ekajaṭā and Hayagrīva. Such combination, especially with seated Tārā is not observed in other places. But there are two more standing Tārā figures in Bodh Gaya flanked by Ekajaṭā and Hayagrīva.²⁹ The Tārā iconography with Ekajaṭā and Hayagrīva in Bihar, denying the description of the *Sādhanamālā* therefore became a standard practice. Interestingly we can surmise that even within the region of Patna and Nālandā which were the hub of literary culture, a parallel domain of Buddhist art emerged.

²⁶ G. Bhattacharya, "A Second Dated Tārā Image of the Reign of Devapāla" in *Indian Museum Bulletin*, Calcutta, 1992, p. 22

²⁷ G. Bhattacharya, "A Second Dated Tārā Image", p. 22.

²⁸ B. Bhattacharyya (ed), *Sādhanamālā*, p. 309

²⁹ G. Bhattacharya, "A Second Dated Tārā Image", p. 23.

4.3.4 Antichak

The Monghyr and Bhagalpur district of Bihar can be identified as roughly corresponding to the Aṅga region which also serves as an interface region between Magadha and Bengal. Aṅga was at various times part of the Magadha kingdom and at others a principality of Bengal dynasties. Its position as an interface region between Bihar and Bengal is clearly reflected in its art which reveals the influence of both regions. The Vikramśīla Mahāvihāra in Antichak, graced by learned scholars like Dīpaṅkara Śrījñāna and especially endowed with the active patronage of the Pāla rulers, was one of the most prominent centres. The centre may have been associated with the cluster of images found from Bhagalpur and Monghyr districts. Buddhist tantra practices may be traced to have been expanding in the vicinity of such centres. Most of the images belonged to 11th -12th century as this period. An image of Saṃvara (11th century) from Bhagalpur bears special significance as it is rare. The icon Saṃvara belonged to Akṣobhya, the most prominent Dhyānī Buddha popular in eastern India. The *Sādhanamālā* states the following about this divinity: Saṃvara tramples upon Bhairava and Kālarātri and is clad in tiger skin. The effigy of Akṣobhya is carried on his crown head and the divinity is described to be blue in colour, holding the kapāla and Vajra full of blood.³⁰ The fiery and anti-Brahmanical character is evident from this description.

4.3.5 Puṇḍravardhana

The corpus of images found from the Puṇḍravardhana region includes at least five figures of the Buddha – from Rajshahi, Bhasu Vihāra (Mahasthangarh), Dinajpur, Paharpur and Dhamri. Among them the figures from Rajshahi and Bhasu Vihāra are the earliest, belonging to 5th and 7th centuries CE respectively. At least six Avalokiteśvara images were found from Mahasthangarh, Rajshahi, Dinajpur and Sylhet. Among them the one from Mahastangarh and Sylhet belonged to the 9th century CE and the rest belonged to the 12th century. Two important images of Dhyānī Buddha, Amitābha and Ratnasambhava were found in Vikrampur and Mahabari of Dhaka district. Both dated to the 11th century CE.

An interesting figure of Hevajra (12th c) from Paharpur requires special attention since very few figures of Hevajra have been found in Bengal, although the divinity became very common in

³⁰ Bhattacharyya (ed), *Sādhanamālā*, p. 504

Nepal and Tibet.³¹ Hevajra is described in the Heruka maṇḍala of the *Niṣpaṇṇayogāvalī*.³² It is difficult to differentiate between Heruka and Hevajra as both of them are almost identical from iconographical point.³³ When Heruka is accompanied by his Prajñā Nairātmā he becomes Hevajra. There are at least four forms of Hevajra of two-armed, four armed, eight-armed and sixteen armed variants described in the Hevajra Maṇḍala. Hevajra is evidently a violent God as he carries skull full of blood in one of his hands and stampedes upon corpse. Regarding the sixteen-armed variant of Hevajra the *Niṣpaṇṇayogāvalī* says “He has four Māras at his four feet. The first is skandha Māra in the form of Brahma of yellow colour, the second is kleṣa Māra in the form of Viṣṇu of blue colour, the third is Mrityu Māra in the form of Maheśvara and of white colour and the fourth is Devaputra Māra in the form of Śakra in white colour.”³⁴ It is a very important male deity in the Buddhist pantheon, orienting the tantra elements within the conception of divine powers, especially representing strong anti - brahmanical stand, trodding on the principal Brahmanical gods like Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Maheśvara. Found in the Somapura vihāra of Paharpur, the presence of the image may represent a desperate response to the Brahmanical fold by the Buddhist inhabitants of Paharpur vihāra.

An interesting image of Pretasantarpita Lokeśvara has been found from Tapan in Dakkhin-Dinajpur. It has been dated to the 11th century. It is presently housed in the West Bengal State Archaeology Museum in Kolkata.³⁵ The deity sits in Ardhaparyāṅka posture on a full-blown double petaled lotus. The saptāratha pedestal of the deity is decorated with the figures of the preta Sūcīmukha in the right corner. The seated figure of the deity in Varadāmudrā is flanked by Hayagrīva in tarjanī mudrā sitting to the left and Sudhanakumāra to the right. The five cosmic Buddhas are arranged round the halo. This image is a very important representation of the preta or the demon deities in the Buddhist pantheon. There are more images of the Pretasantarpita-Lokeśvara accompanied by the emaciated, ugly-looking, pointed mouthed ghost Sūcīmukha described by Gouriswar Bhattacharya. The *Sādhanamālā*, which includes 38 Sādhanās describing

³¹ Bhattacharyya, *The Indian Buddhist Iconography*, p. 159

³² Bhattacharyya (ed), *Niṣpaṇṇayogāvalī*, p. 14.

³³ Bhattacharyya, *The Indian Buddhist Iconography*, p. 157

³⁴ Bhattacharyya (ed), *Niṣpaṇṇayogāvalī*, pp. 14-15

³⁵ Gautam Sengupta, Sharmila Saha, *Vibrant Rocks: A Catalogue of Stone Sculpture in the State Archaeological Museum, West Bengal*, Kolkata: CASTEI, 2014, p. 206

different forms of Avalokiteśvara, records only one Sāadhanā where Avalokiteśvara or Lokeśvara is associated with Sūcīmukha and the title of this Sāadhanā is Khasarpaṇa Sāadhanā composed by the monk Padmakaramati.³⁶ The Sāadhanā describes the sixteen-year - old young lord with a smiling face, seated in a Ardhaparyāṅka attitude, two-armed, with the right hand in varadā mudrā, and the left hand holding a lotus with a stalk. Below the right hand flows the stream of nectar (pīyūṣa). The icon is imagined as satiating the big-bellied, emaciated, dark coloured Sūcīmukha. Lokeśvara is accompanied by Tārā in front, Sudhanakumāra to the right, Bhṛkūti to west and Hayagrīva to north. A composite frame of icons, the image and the conception represent elaborate ideas of tantra.

Gouriswar Bhattacharya has divided all the Pretasantarpita-Lokeśvaras into two groups – seated and standing. He has given an account of 7 seated and 14 standing Pretasantarpita-Lokeśvara images mainly from Puṇḍravardhana and Magadha regions.³⁷ The composite images reveal the Preta Sūcīmukha and the demon god Hayagrīva as marginalized demi forces in inferior position to the main deity Avalokiteśvara. In another Sāadhanā Hayagrīva is described as bearing a terrible face with bare fangs, wearing a garland of skulls with prominent teeth and lips, with jaṭā crowned with the figure of Amitābha.³⁸ He wears ornaments of eight serpents, possesses a short and dwarfish body clad in tiger skin. He is described as threatening all the gods and asuras, and holding the vajra and the staff in his two hands. The angry facial expression of Hayagrīva is thus distinct from that of the smiling face of Avalokiteśvara. This and other such framed depictions indicate the peripheral position that the demonic or semi-divine fierce gods and goddesses were assigned to in the Buddhist pantheon.

4.3.6 Samataṭa

The Samataṭa region saw the administrative and religious centers closely located. The images were found to be mostly concentrated in Mainamati of the Comilla district and Jhewari of the Chittagong district. From the dating of these images, we can anticipate that the whole Samataṭa region produced some of the earliest images in Bengal and Bihar. Most images belonged between the 7th and 9th centuries CE and a few to the 10th and 11th centuries CE. The Khadgas were the first rulers in the region who were ardent supporters of Buddhism. Seng-Chi has described that the

³⁶ Bhattacharyya (ed), *Sāadhanamālā*, p. 39-41

³⁷ G. Bhattacharya, *Pretasantarpita-Lokesvara*, in *Journal of Bengal Art*, Vol. 6, pp. 23-40.

³⁸ B. Bhattacharyya (ed), *Sāadhanamālā*, p. 509.

Khadga king Rājarājabhatta used to hold an image of Avalokiteśvara high while leading processions in his capital. The inscriptions on all the five images of Mainamati mostly began with the Buddhist auspicious introduction, ‘*ye dhamma hetu*’ etc. The image inscription on the pedestal of the bronze Mañjuśrī of Salban Vihāra mentions that it was a pious gift of sthavira Nabhadra.³⁹ Three of the five inscribed images were found from the vihāras of Mainamati in *in situ* position.

An important image of Heruka (11th c) was found in Subhapur, Comilla, now preserved in the Dhaka Museum. The *Sādhanamālā* stated that the worship of Heruka conferred Buddhahood to the worshipper.⁴⁰ He seems to be a violent God as the text stated following: “He carries in his left hand the *kapāla* full of blood. His necklace is beautified by a chain of half-a-hundred severed heads. His face is slightly distorted with bare fangs and blood-shot eyes. His brown hair rises upward and forms into a crown which bears the effigy of Akṣobhya. He wears a kundala and decked in ornaments of bone. His head is beautified by five skulls. He bestows Buddhahood and protects the world from Māra”.⁴¹ The image of Heruka with 17 skulls indeed reflects a unique cult as the presence of the deity is hardly found in other regions of Bihar and Bengal. Unlike the Hevajra image of Paharpur whose provenance was associated with a well-developed religious center of Bengal, the Heruka image hails from a remote village named Subhapur in Comilla district.

An octo-alloy image of Sitātapatrā can be referred to discovered from the Comilla district belonging to as early as 9th century CE. Nalinikanta Bhattasali has identified it as Sitātapatrā following the iconography of Miss Alice Getty.⁴² He also described it as having emanated from Amitābha. However, in the *Sādhanamālā*, Amitābha has not been attributed with any goddess named Sitātapatrā.⁴³ Rather a goddess named Sitātapatrā Aparājitā was described in *Sādhanamālā* as having emanated from Vairocana. She is described as the goddess with white parasol and having six-arms.⁴⁴ The said image also shows a white parasol and six arms though Bhattasali claims that

³⁹ Harunur Rashid, “The Mainamati Inscription”, in Enamul Haque (ed) *Hakim Habibur Rahaman Commemoration Volume*, Dhaka: ICSBA 2001, pp. 216-217.

⁴⁰ Bhattacharyya (ed), *Sādhanamālā*, p. 156.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, p. 473.

⁴² Bhattasali, *Iconography of Buddhist and Brahmanical Sculptures*, p. 53

⁴³ Bhattacharyya (ed), *Sādhanamālā*, pp. 145-153

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, p. 395.

it was actually eight-armed and the two arms have been lost. If we are to believe that the goddess is actually Sitātapatrā Aparājitā who destroys all sort of evil spirits, it might render a unique cultural significance in Samataṭa region as such image is rare in its counterparts.

At least three bronze images of Mahāpratisarā were unearthed from Mainamati. The cult of Mahāpratisarā became prominent in Java, Indonesia, Tibet and Japan during 12th century CE. In 8th century Amoghavajra, the Buddhist scholar who translated Mahāpratisarādhāraṇī played a key role in popularizing the cult of Mahāpratisarā by visiting a number of extensive regions in central, south and south-eastern Asia including Tibet, Java and Srilanka.⁴⁵ Mevissen has pointed out that eastern India especially the Mainamati region was the most important hub of Mahāpratisarā cult which later disseminated in other parts of central and south-eastern Asia through the travel of Buddhist monks. He even argues that the bronze image of Mahāpratisarā in Java was an import from eastern India.⁴⁶ The Mahāpratisarā, an important goddess of Pañcarakṣā group represented singly or with four other Pañcarakṣā deities in maṇḍala, therefore bears a unique culture in the Mainamati region.

4.3.7 Harikela

Jhewari in the Chittagong district in Bangladesh, also known as Harikela, yielded a hoard bronze image, first recorded by Debala Mitra in 1929.⁴⁷ The hoard comprises of 61 Buddhist images, 2 miniature shrines and 3 fragments of images. D.C Sircar has noticed four inscribed stone images from Jhewari which was the donation or deyadharmā by the sthāviras and śākyabhikṣus belonging to Mahāyāna Buddhism.⁴⁸ Harikela was a thriving centre of Buddhism from the second half of the 7th century CE. We learn from the Tāranātha's account that Pandita Vihāra was located in the city of Chātigramā which also attracted the Chinese Buddhist monks. We come to know from Yijing's account that a Chinese monk named Wu-hing sailed from Simhala to the country of O-li-ki-lo or Harikela. The Harikela region shared close ties with Arakan which yielded at least

⁴⁵ G.J.R. Mevissen, "Images of Mahāpratisarā in Bengal; Their Iconographic Links with Javanese Central Asian and East Asian Images" in *Journal of Bengal Art*, Vol. 4, 1999, p. 117

⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 118.

⁴⁷ Debala Mitra, *Bronzes from Bangladesh: a study of Buddhist images from District Chittagong*, Delhi: Agam Kala Prakashan, 1982.

⁴⁸ Sarita Khettry, "Śākyabhikṣu of Bronze Image Inscription of Bengal (West Bengal and Bangladesh)", in *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, 2010-11, Vol. 71, P. 149

eight Sanskrit inscriptions noticed and read by E.J. Johnston and reviewed later by Arlo Griffith. Three of these inscriptions are votive inscriptions beginning with the Buddhist introduction - 'ye dhamma hetu' etc. while one inscription of 100 lines is very significant comprising the panegyrics of king Ānandachandra.⁴⁹ Johnston had noted that the inscriptions, earliest of which belonged to 7th century, bore significant paleographic resemblance with the inscriptions of north-eastern India and present-day Bangladesh. The socio – economic and cultural connections between the regions have been traced by scholars like Suchandra Ghosh who has also pointed out that the Kaladan valley in Myanmar shared interconnectedness with Comilla and Chittagong in terms of geological features, riverine networks and trade.⁵⁰ The Harikela coins also provide a significant clue to the ancient connections between these two regions. The script and letters in the coins show affinity with the Arakanese alphabet.

The earliest metal images of Jhewari of Chittagong district belonged to the 9th century CE. The similarity in the stylistic pattern with the Mainamati images proves that they belonged to the same school of art. The tantra cult in this region was physically represented by as many as five images of Buddha along with three figures of Dhyānī Buddha Akṣobhya, Vairocana and Amitābha. Among the five Dhyānī Buddha Akṣobhya was most important in Eastern India.⁵¹ Gouriswar Bhattacharya argues that Śākyamuni Buddha in Bihar and Bengal has been represented in most of the images as having emanated from Akṣobhya, not Amitābha as shown by Getty.⁵² Iconographical problems in identifying the Dhyānī Buddha and differentiating them with the Buddha Śākyamuni has been raised by Bhattacharya who argues that the sculptors in this period never provided jewelries in Śākyamuni's arms but on the arms of Dhyānī Buddha.⁵³ He further argues that each Buddha figures in Bhūmisparśa Mudrā having an elephant in the centre of the throne is actually Akṣobhya, not Śākyamuni. The corpus of images in Jhewari also comprised of the Jambhala, Tara

⁴⁹ E.J. Johnston, "Some Sanskrit Inscription of Arakan", *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, University of London, 1944, Vol. 11, No. 2 (1944), p. 359

⁵⁰ Suchandra Ghosh, *Connected Histories: Notes Towards an Understanding of Early India-Myanmar Interaction*, p. 216.

⁵¹ Gouriswar Bhattacharya, "Buddha Śākyamuni and Pañca Tathāgata: Dilemma in Bihar-Bengal" in K. Frifelt and P. Sorensen (eds) *South Asian Archaeology*, London, 1985, p. 351

⁵² *Ibid*, p. 351.

⁵³ *Ibid*, p. 354.

and Vasudhara.⁵⁴ The Vasudhara image of Jhewari, is two-armed, seated in a lalitasana posture and wearing a upavita and armlet.

4.3.8 Vaṅga

In Vaṅga region an image of Avalokiteśvara from Badrahati of Hoogly district and Parinirvana from Khalisadi, south 24 Pargana were found. Both of them belonged to 11th century CE. Another image of Akṣobhya (11th century) was found from Bareya in Nadia district. A figure of Parṇasābarī (11th c) from Nayanda, Dhaka bears significant cultural implication in the tantra practice. In *Sādhanamālā* the following is stated about her: “her jaṭāmukuta is decorated with flowers and the image of Akṣobhya; she has the effulgence of the sun as her aureole, stands in the Pratyāliḍha attitude on the moon over the white lotus, trampling under her feet the vighnas. She threatens the host of other vighnas with the clenched fist of the left hand exhibiting the tarjani against the chest...”⁵⁵ Benoytosh Bhattacharya has equated the Vighnas with Ganesa following a Parṇasābarī figure in the Indian Museum who tramples upon Ganesa⁵⁶ but it is not beyond doubt. Though, she has been described having emanated from Akṣobhya and having yellow colour, another *Sādhanā* attributes her origin from Amoghasiddhi of green colour⁵⁷. The cultural implication of Parṇasābarī however is of special significance as she is hailed as the preventer of epidemics and assuring safety to the people from bad health. In iconography it is also stated that she is decked with all sort of ornaments and also bears a garment of leaves which leave us to believe that she was associated with forest and tree.

4.4 The Image Inscription: Mapping the Social Base of Patronage

The patronage pattern of the Buddhist monks can be gleaned from the votive or dedicatory inscription on the donated image and stūpas. Susan Huntington has showed that the dated images can be instrumental in understanding the stylistic development of the sculptures in the different sub-regions. There are considerable number of the Buddhist sculptures which bears the dating of the Pāla rulers. For example, dated images of Hārītī, Tārā and Pañcika can be attributed to the

⁵⁴ Debala Mitra, *Bronzes from Bangladesh: a study of Buddhist images from District Chittagong*, Delhi: Agam Kala Prakashan, 1982, pp. 101-112.

⁵⁵ Bhattacharyya (ed), *Sādhanamālā*, p. 306.

⁵⁶ Bhattacharyya, *The Indian Buddhist Iconography*, p. 197.

⁵⁷ Bhattacharyya (ed), *Sādhanamālā*, p. 308

reign of Devapāla.⁵⁸ The inscription on the image of Tārā, found from Hilsa, included an invocation to the deity and to the Buddhist creed. It also mentioned the lay devotee Gaṅgādhara who made the donation to the Nālandā Mahāvihāra. Other than the individual divinity, dated inscriptions are also found from the pedestal of the life scene of Śākyamuni Buddha. For example, two sculptures depicting the major scene of Śākyamuni's life like descending from Trayastriṃśa and taming of Nalagiri can be attributed to the reign of Śūrapāla I in the mid-9th century CE.⁵⁹ The provenance of these images lies in the Bihar Sharif region where stood the grand monastery of Odantapura. Similarly, scenes depicting Buddha's miracle in Sravasti and delivering the first sermon can be placed in the reign of Vighrapāla I and Mahendrapāla respectively. Huntington has noted that the dated images of the Pāla period owed their stylistic origin to the older tradition prevalent in the Magadha region.⁶⁰ However, new characteristics were synthesizing with the already extant tradition and created distinctive Pāla style of art. At the same time, she has raised question regarding the connection between direct patronage of the Pāla rulers and the rise of a distinctive school of art.

Though majority of the votive inscriptions were attributed to the lay donors, a significant number of them recorded the donation of the Buddhist monks who were pilgrims to the sacred place. Large hoard of votive inscriptions was found from Kurkihar in Bihar and Jhewari in the Samatāṭa-Harikela region. B.N. Prasad has surveyed sixty image inscriptions from the Kurkihar hoard, and made a detailed analysis of them to delineate on the cultic identity of the donors and the patterns of the Buddhist deities and inscribed sculptures as evolved over the ninth, tenth, eleventh and twelfth centuries.⁶¹ The majority of the donors have identified themselves in the inscriptions as pravara-mahayāna-anuyāyīna which according to him, indicates that they were the followers of Mahāyāna Buddhism. He has extensively relied on the study of Schopen to determine the sectarian affiliation of the donors. For example, the title śākyabhikṣu and śākyabhikṣuni signified a monk and nun respectively affiliated to Mahāyāna Buddhism. He has also curiously pointed out that ten inscribed images of 9th– 13th century were donated by the donors from Kanchi

⁵⁸ Huntington, *The Pala-Sena Schools of Sculptures*, p. 41

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, p. 46

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, p. 45.

⁶¹ B.N. Prasad, "The Socio-religious Dimension of Dedicatory Inscriptions on Sculptures Donated to a Buddhist Establishment in Early Medieval Magadha: Kurkihar, c. 800 CE – 1200 CE", in *Rethinking Bihar and Bengal: History, Culture and Religion*, New Delhi: Manohar, 2022, pp. 41-84

like Sthavira Nadradeva, Buddhavarmana, Prajñāsiṃha and Sthavira Budhajñāna. Similarly, in the case of the Jhewari bronze hoard, there were monk donors like sthavira Subhadatta, and sthavira Kumārabhadra.⁶² Most of these names appeared in the pedestal of images of Buddha in bhūmiṣparśa mudrā donated as an act of deyadhamma for the purpose of attaining anuttara jñāna of all creatures. Donative inscriptions recording the deyadhamma of Buddhist monks were also found from the Bodh Gaya region from 4th century up to 12th century.⁶³ We find the names of the monks like Śākyabhikṣu Mahānāma, Śākyabhikṣu Dharmagupta, Śākyabhikṣu Damastrasena, Sthavira Aniruddhavarmana and Sthavira Viryendra. These monks mainly from the Mahāyāna background travelled long distance from their habitation and constituted one of the most formidable patronage bases as a part of their pilgrimage activity.

We find the name and identity of the lay followers from the votive inscriptions. They came from diverse social backgrounds like merchants, tannery worker, etc. Among the lay patrons of Nālandā were the seventh century merchant brothers named Mugarāgomin Śaṅkarapati and Br̥haspati-Siddharāja. Many of the Kurkihar votive inscriptions the lay followers were designated as paramopāsaka and paramopāsikā which according to B.N. Prasad signified Mahāyāna worshipper. None of the lay donors of Kurkihar except two has mentioned their varna/jāti status which might signify that the monastery facilitated the marginalization of varna/jāti based identities. The corpus of image inscriptions of Kurkihar leads us to assume the heterogeneous social strata of the donors. Many of the donors belonged to the mercantile background like Vanika Maneka. However, in many cases the social background of the donor is not mentioned leading us to infer that they probably belonged to non-aristocratic class. Nevertheless, there were a few instances where the lower caste people engraved their identity like Carmakāra Thisavi, a donor with untouchable background recorded his name in one of the 9th century images. The dwindling number of images of the Buddha sitting in the posture of bhūmiṣparśa and *Dharmachakrapavattana* signify that the Kurkihar images were not so much Mahāyāna in nature. The Kurkihar images predominantly comprise of Siddhāikavira, Vagiśvara, Parnaśabari,

⁶² B.N. Prasad, “Votive Inscription on the Sculptures of Early Medieval Samatata-Harikela, Bengal: Explorations in Socio-religious History”, in *Religion of South Asia*, 4.1, 2010, p. 35

⁶³ B.N. Prasad, “Dedicatory Inscription on the Sculptures of Bodh Gaya, c. 4th – 12th Century A.D.: Exploration in Socio-Religious History”, in *Journal of Bengal Art*, Vo. 24, 2019, pp. 91-101

Vasudhārā and Harītī which were meant for fulfilling the mundane (laukika) need.⁶⁴ However, these laukika deities were incorporated in the orbit of Vajrayāna/tantric Buddhism later, as attested by the Buddhist text *Sādhanamālā*, provoking us to infer that kurkihar probably was an important centre of Tantrism. The majority of the dedicatory inscription of Vikramśīla belonged to Mahāyāna creed. Absence of social identity of the donors in Vikramśīla has been attributed to the non-aristocratic background by B.N. Prasad like the case of Kurkihar.⁶⁵ Lay donors appearing in the votive inscription might also be mentioned in the corpus of image inscription from Jhewari and Bodh Gaya.

4.5 The Comparative Analysis of Textual and Visual Iconography

Iconography is one of the primary subjects of Buddhist art that has attracted attention of most of the scholars engaged in the study of the image. It has been a common practice among the art historians to identify certain Buddhist images by matching its iconography with the description in *Sādhanamālā*. Gouriswar Bhattacharya is of opinion that the sculptors strictly followed the description of *Sādhanamālā* before carving out an image.⁶⁶ However, there is no ample evidence in support of this view. A few scholars on the other hand are of the opinion that the realm of textual and visual iconography must be kept separate.⁶⁷ The text and the art might belong to different period and no certain correspondence can be established between them. It is also very difficult to identify the image of a deity on the basis of text as there were numerous forms of a particular deity (like two-handed and six-handed forms of Avalokiteśvara) along with variation within a particular form. The iconographical description provided for the deities in the text doesn't always match with the visual iconography. This proposition needs to be further investigated by tracing out what a particular iconographic description in the texts and its counterpart in the visual image meant. In other words, the different purpose of the textual and visual iconography needs to be addressed.

⁶⁴ B.N. Prasad, "The Socio-religious Dimension of Dedicatory Inscriptions on Sculptures Donated to a Buddhist Establishment in Early Medieval Magadha: Kurkihar, c. 800 CE – 1200 CE", in *Rethinking Bihar and Bengal: History, Culture and Religion*, New Delhi: Manohar, 2022, pp. 72-75

⁶⁵ B.N. Prasad, "The Social Bases of Patronage to the Vikramsila Mahavihara", in *Rethinking Bihar and Bengal: History, Culture and Religion*, New Delhi: Manohar, 2022, pp. 100-103

⁶⁶ Gouriswar Bhattacharya, 'Iconography of Stone Sculpture', in Abdul M. Chowdhury and Ranabir Chakraborty (ed), *History of Bangladesh*, Dhaka: 2018, p. 466

⁶⁷ Frederick M Asher, *The Art of Eastern India 300-800*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1980, p. 6

In this section we shall discuss a few images and analyse how far they showed similarities to their textual counterpart. We have taken up two different images of Mārīcī preserved in the National Museum of Bangladesh, Dhaka (Fig. 1) and Varendra Research Museum, Rajshahi (Fig. 2). Both the images can be dated to the 10th century and their provenance also lies very close to each other. Mārīcī an emanation of the Dhyānī Buddha Vairocana, has been described as “Vairocanakulodbhā” or “born of the family of Vairocana” in the *Sādhanamālā*. She resides in the interior of the Caitya as Vairocana is the lord of the sanctum temple or stūpa. None of the images under discussion has been discovered from any shrine or monastic cell of Buddhist monastery. The shrine in the monastery is often considered as the symbolic stūpa under Vajrayāna. The image of the stūpa can be observed on top of both the images (Fig. 1 and 2) and might indicate the deity’s significance as the guardian of the stūpa.

The colour assigned to Vairocana and all the goddesses emanated from him are white. The goddess is believed to be the Buddhist counterpart of the Brahmanical God Sūrya. Like the Sun-God she too has a chariot which is drawn by seven pigs instead of horse in the case of Sūrya. The charioteer of Mārīcī is a goddess with no legs which according to Benoytosh Bhattacharyya might be Rāhu. She stands in the Āliḍha attitude and moves in a chariot. In both Fig. 1 and 2 we can see the textual iconographical description regarding the chariot, charioteer and the chariot puller matches with the visual images. Sixteen Sādhanas in the *Sādhanamālā* describe six distinct forms of Mārīcī. She may have one, three or five faces and two, eight, ten or twelve arms. The tree faced and eight-armed type of Mārīcī is known as Mārīcīpicuvā in *Sādhanamālā*. She is generally accompanied by her four attendants Varttālī, Vadāli, Varāli and Varāhamukhī can be observed around the deity’s legs (Fig. 1 and 2). In both the images the right face of the deity is the sow face which is also the typical characteristics of Mārīcī. The weapons held by her eight arms have not been specified in any Sādhanas leading us to infer that the sculptors of image set up this standard tradition in Vikrampur region. Therefore, the sculptors had their own autonomy to assign specific weapons in specific arms of the deity and this artistic practice can be distinguished from the textual description.

Another popular deity in tantra pantheon is Heruka whose sculptures are available sporadically in eastern Bengal. Here, we propose to analyse two images of Heruka, one is from the National Museum of Bangladesh (Fig. 3), and the other is from Mainamati Museum (Fig. 4).

Both the images are from Comilla region and belonged to the period between the 9th and 10th centuries CE. When the deity is worshipped with his consort Vajravārāhī, he becomes Hevajra, to whom Hevajra Tantra is dedicated. In the *Sādhanamālā* it is stated that the worship of Heruka leads to the attainment of Buddhahood and he destroys all the Maras of the world. He stands on a corpse in Ardhaparyāṅka attitude and holds the Vajra in the right hand and his body is covered with ashes. From his left shoulder hangs the Khaṭvaṅga like a sacred thread. He carries in his left hand Kapāla full of blood. His necklace as made of fifty severed heads. His face is distorted with bare fangs and blood –shot eyes. He wears a kuṇḍala and decked in ornaments of bones. His head is beautified by five skulls and his brown hair rises upward to form a crown. In another sadhana dedicated to Heruka, it does not specify the number of skulls. Here, the Khaṭvaṅga is marked with a vajra of five thongs and decorated with the banner with jingling bells, human heads and double lotus. His left leg rests on the double lotus while the right is places on the left thigh in a dancing attitude.

In the light of the above description, we can assess the two proposed images of Fig. 3 and 4. Both the images show meagre discrepancies in a couple of features. The most prominent difference between the two figures is that the left leg of Fig. 3 rests on a lotus while that of Fig. 4 stampedes on a corpse with pointed cap. The right hands of both the images are damaged barring us to speculate about any similarities or discrepancies between them. The blood bowl for Fig. 4 is there in the left hand of the deity disagreeing with the textual description and the bowl in the hand of Fig. 3, if any, is damaged. The three subsidiary dancing figures on the back slab of Fig. 4 one of which looks very similar to the deity himself are also missing on Fig. 3. We find no mention of these subsidiary figures in *Sādhanamālā*. We can also keenly notice the three figures on the pedestal of Fig. 4 one of which is holding a bow.

Another important Buddhist male deity that is found in both north and south Bengal is the Jambhala. It requires our special attention because it is a deity which found a continuous presence in the Mahāyāna pantheon in the sculptural form in different regions of Indian subcontinent. In the Gandhara school, Jambhala is found along with other Mahāyāna deities like Maitreya and Harīti. Jambhala image might also be found in the Sarnath Museum and it was very well represented in the eastern Indian school of art. An emanation of Akṣobhya or Ratnasambhava, Jambhala is the god of wealth. There are two forms of Jambhala that we find in the iconographic text *Sādhanamālā*

– one is three faced and six armed and another is with terrible appearance with kubera as its vāhana. We shall take two images of Jambhala from Shirajganj (Fig. 5) and Bhanpur (Fig. 6) belonging to 9th and 10th centuries respectively and analyze their iconographies in comparison to text. Jambhala, according to Benoytosh Bhattacharyya, is a Yakṣa and might belong to a non-Buddhist origin. This was probably the reason why Jambhala’s parental transcendental Buddha could not be determined with certainty.⁶⁸ In one of the Sādhanas he is three faced and six-armed and on his matted hair there is an image of Akṣobhya. He carries in his three right hands the citron, the goad and the arrow. With his first left hand he embraces the Prajñā, while with his second and third left hands he holds a mongoose and an arrow respectively.⁶⁹ In another Sādhanā a second form of Jambhala has been described where the deity has been named Uccuṣma Jambhala.⁷⁰ He also bears an image of Akṣobhya on his crown. His appearance is like a child of five years and dwarfish. His headdress is decorated with jewel and he stands on a double lotus on a moon in the Pratyāliḍha attitude. Uccuṣma stampedes with his right leg the forehead of sleeping dhanadā with his jewels coming out of his mouth. He is nude and has a protruding belly and his eyes are fixed on the kapāla full of blood carried by his right hand near his chest. With his left hand he holds a mongoose vomiting out jewels on his left thigh. He has large ears which are unpierced and his face is distorted with bare fangs and his three eyes are red and round. His eyebrows are also distorted and his brown hair rises upwards.

Now, in the light of this description we can analyse the visual iconographies of Fig. 5 and 6. Both the figures in terms of their number of face and hands closely resemble the Sādhanā of Uccuṣma. However, despite their certain common ground of similarities the figures also deviate heavily in terms of their absence of the terrible appearance. While the Fig. 5 have bulging eye agreeing with the prescribed sadhana, the eyes of Fig. 6 remained close and rather calm. None of the figures show bare fangs or three red eyes, though they have protruding bellies in common. The figures also sit in ardhaparyāṅka attitude instead of pratyāliḍha attitude. Both the figures hold a mongoose in their left hands but there is no kapāla full of blood in any of the figures. Both the figures have got their ears pierced mismatching the description in the text. There is no figure of the God Dhanadā on whom the deity stampedes. The basic difference between the two figures is,

⁶⁸ Bhattacharyya, *Indian Buddhist Iconography*, p. 178

⁶⁹ Bhattacharyya (ed), *Sādhanamālā*, p. 565

⁷⁰ Bhattacharyya (ed), *Sādhanamālā*, p. 577

the right leg of Fig. 5 rests one of the five treasure vase (ratna kumbha) in the pedestal while the right leg of the Fig. 6 rests on the lotus coming out of a jackpot. The presence of the treasure vase in the visual iconography of Jambhala can be also found in the terracotta figure of Jambhala found during the excavation at the Buddhist Vihāra in Kankandighi, West Bengal.⁷¹

The common provenance of the Buddhist images therefore, does not ensure their similarities in terms of artistic idioms. Probably even within a common region there were more than one school of sculptors who followed separate standards of sculpting. Regional specificities therefore were marked by the emergence of different schools of sculptors who created their autonomous idioms of the art. Most significantly, sculpting an image on hard surface and meditating on an image through the complex ritualistic worship methods were two completely different aspects of Buddhist tantra. The former was related to art and probably to the mundane need of the laity, while the latter was related to the hardcore spiritual practice. The textual and material domains were therefore had their own distinctive characters and serving the needs of different groups of people.

4.4 The social and cultural implication of the images of Buddhist tantra

Buddhist images that were produced in eastern India from the 8th century CE onwards have been long studied with their artistic and iconographic significance. Most of these studies are devoted to bring out iconographical details with the regional variation of a particular figure. The images however were not bereft of social and cultural significance which can be identified and discussed with the specific purpose they were sculpted for. The Buddhist images were important visual medium that contained both the hardcore religious need as well as the mundane need of the monks and laity. They were given a physical shape by the artist who gave physical shape to the sacred idea of a particular deity. To understand the social and cultural implication of a particular deity, he/she must be studied with the particular need of the society that he/she was serving. The corpus of the Buddhist sculptures embodied a large number of deities who were invoked for different purpose. They might be categorized into a number of thematic categories like the compassionate Mahāyāna deities, wrathful tantra deities, the powerful protective deities, the

⁷¹ Durga Basu, “Early Medieval Material Culture of Coastal Bengal with Special Reference to the Site of Kankandighi,” in Tilottama Mukherjee and Nupur Dasgupta (eds), *Religion, Landscape and Material Culture in Pre-Modern South Asia*, New York: Routledge, p. 255

deities of abundance, the central and peripheral deities of a maṇḍala etc. These categories indicate a heterogeneous cult of Gods and Goddesses that was extant in the ritual world of Buddhist tantra and it was constantly becoming complex by absorbing and appropriating different grassroot cults.

Deification of the Mahāyāna sūtra literature Prajñāpāramitā into the form of a goddess with her tantric worship method signified a tantric turn in Buddhism. It has been already discussed in the introduction and third chapter how the Prajñāpāramitā text is believed to have contained the earliest tantra elements. The tradition of text gained a strong foothold in China and central Asia. Prajñāpāramitā manuscripts with miniature paintings have been recovered from different parts of eastern India bearing the name and regnal year of the Pāla rulers. The recitation of the sutra, dhāraṇī, mantra and other ritual paraphernalia of the Prajñāpāramitā was believed to have conferred the reader with worldly and extra-worldly benefits. Towards the end of the 8th century CE the sacred book was personified and nine sādhanas were dedicated to her. The iconographic description of Mañjuśrī, Vagīsvara and Mañjuvara in the *Sādhanamālā* said that they held the Prajñāpāramitā manuscript in their hands. A stone sculpture of Prajñāpāramitā (Fig. 7) was found from Gazol, Malda. She is seated on a full-blown lotus with her legs locked in meditative pose. She wears neckless, armllets, anklets earrings and bejeweled coronets. The central figure is flanked by two female figures seated on two lotus pedestals. The miniature figure of Akṣobhya is placed on her head.

To identify the Buddhist tantra deities in the corpus of Buddhist images we have to identify certain features and markers that were associated with the tantra culture. The task of categorizing a deity as tantric is very difficult as, art historians and experts have not yet specified any marker with certainty that might be regarded as a definite characteristic of tantra images. Nevertheless, in the light of a certain feature that was hitherto absent in the visual culture of Buddhism and appeared with specific significance, we might try to understand the possible tantra characteristics of a deity. The Buddhist tantra text *Sādhanamālā* for the first time after a spectacular proliferation in the number of Buddhist deities, made an effort to bring all the deities under the *kūla* or family of five transcendent or cosmic Buddhas viz. Akṣobhya, Amitābha, Amoghasiddhi, Ratnasambhava and Vairocana. Each of them shows different hand gesture (Mudrā), with different complexion and different vehicle (vāhana) and most importantly with different female companion, prajñā or śakti.

They completed the tantric form of Buddhism, as observed by Gouriswar Bhattacharya.⁷² Among these transcendent Buddhas, Amitabha played a very important role from earlier times and Akṣobhya became very important in eastern India. Akṣobhya's immense relevance in the Buddhist tantra might be attested by the wrathful character of Buddhist deities that have emanated from him. Almost all the fearsome male and female deities under the tantra oriented pantheon including Heruka, Hevajra, Saṃvara, Hayagrīva, Raktayamāri, Kṛṣṇayamāri, Jambhala, Trailokyavijaya, Mahācīnatārā, Ekajaṭā, Jāngulī, Parṇaśabarī, Prajñāpāramitā, Vasudhārā, Nairātmā are the emanations of Akṣobhya. In the Bengal region the Bhūmisparśa figure was gradually absorbed into the iconography of Akṣobhya instead of Śākyamuni. The motif of elephant as the Vāhana of Akṣobhya as well as his bejeweled hand distinguished him from the Buddha Śākyamuni.⁷³ Akṣobhya is the leader of the Vajra family and in the Advayavajrasaṃgraha he is mentioned as the Vajrakulī.⁷⁴ The text also gives vivid description of the second transcendent Buddha Akṣobhya by mentioning that he originates from the blue syllable Huṃ, and is two-armed and one faced exhibiting earth touching gesture. He sits in the Vajraparyāṅka pose. To signify the Vajraparyāṅka pose, a motif of Vajra is often depicted on or under the lotus seat of the deity as can be observed in the two Akṣobhya images (Fig. 8 and 9) in the Bangladesh National Museum and one from the Mahasthangarh Museum (Fig. 10). Vajra, an important marker of Vajrayāna or Buddhist tantra can be thus noted to have appeared regularly in the images of Akṣobhya who was the progenitor of vajra family. The celebrated Bhūmisparśa Mudrā of the Buddha thus was tantricised with the insertion of vajra.

Vajra also became an important iconographical symbol of Vajrasattva and Vajradhara. Vajrasattva is often considered to be equivalent to Ādi Buddha or the first creative principle. The Vajrayāna Buddhist community possesses a wide range of traditions regarding the identification of Ādi Buddha. Some of them consider one of the five transcendent Buddha as the earliest originator while some subscribe to the belief that Vajrasattva himself is the Ādi Buddha. In one of these traditions Bodhisattva Sāmantapāṇi or Vajrapāṇi is considered to be the Ādi Buddha. A very interesting thing to note here is that all the Bodhisattva figures holding a Vajra are inextricably linked to the tradition of Ādi Buddha. Thus, the Vajrayāna Buddhism distinguished itself from the

⁷² Gouriswar Bhattacharya, 'Tantric Buddhist Images', in *Encyclopedia of India*, p. 135

⁷³ Gourishwar Bhattacharya, "Buddha Śākyamunis and Pañcatathāgatas", p. 354

⁷⁴ Bhattacharyya, *Indian Buddhist Iconography*, p. 49

Mahāyāna by introducing Vajra to the essential Bodhisattva figures. The significance of Vajrasattva rose to such degree that he was considered to be the sixth transcendental Buddha. He has not been assigned a kula or lineage as he has an independent character having no family or any special elements. In the Nepali tradition he is also considered to be the priest of five transcendental Buddhas. Generally, two forms of the deity are mentioned in the texts: single and Yub-yum (intercourse). His worship was always performed in secret and was strictly not open who are not initiated to Vajrayāna. However, *Advayvajrasaṃgraha* prescribes that he might be exhibited before public when he is exhibited singly. The same text also states that he originates from the syllable Hum. He is one faced and holds in his two hands the vajra and ghanta or bell. The Vajra and Ghanta (bell) essentially symbolized the masculine and feminine principle of a tantra deity. A very large bronze image of Vajrasattva (1.4m X 1.2m) has been found from the Bhoj Vihāra in Mainamati during an excavation in 1994. The image (Fig. 11) can be dated between 9th-10th centuries CE. Here the deity is sitting in crossed legged position in Vajrāsana. He wears a fine ornamented dress including decorated waist belt and earrings. He holds a vajra by his right hands placed near his chest, while his left hand holding a bell touches his hips. This iconic bronze image certainly indicates the presence of a Vajrayāni Buddhist community in the Mainamati region.

New tantra features were also introduced to the well-known Mahāyāna Bodhisattva figures like Avalokiteśvara, Tārā and Mañjuśrī. In the tantra imagery of Bengal, the image of Khasarpaṇa Avalokiteśvara and Pretasantarpita Lokeśvara became very much apparent as two widely available forms of Avalokiteśvara. The Khasarpaṇa Avalokiteśvara was rendered an additional tantra character by the introduction of Tārā, Sudhanakumāra, Bhṛkūṭi and Hayagrīva with the occasional addition of Preta Sūcīmukha. Gourishwar Bhattacharya has recorded at least seven seated and twelve standing figures of this special form of Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara known as Pretasantarpita Lokeśvara.⁷⁵ The presence of this form of deity can be attributed to the region of Bengal from 8th-9th centuries CE onwards. In these images, Avalokiteśvara is accompanied by the emaciated ugly looking needle-faced ghost (preta) Sūcīmukha. In one of the thirty-eight Sādhanās dedicated to Avalokiteśvara, the deity is associated with preta Sūcīmukha and the Sādhanā was composed by monk Padmakaramati. The sadhana describes Avalokiteśvara seated in Ardhaparyāṅka attitude, he is two-armed and with his right hand exhibits the varadā mudrā and

⁷⁵ Gourishwar Bhattacharya, "Pretasantarpita Lokeśvara," pp. 24-40

with his left arm he holds a lotus. He distributes a stream of nectar flowing from his hands and Sūcīmukha stands below with an uplifted face, protruding belly and a very pale appearance receives the nectar. The figure of Hayagrīva has also been described with fearsome appearance with protruding belly, wearing a snake as his sacred thread, distorted eyebrows and clad with tiger skin.⁷⁶

A very prominent standing six-handed Avalokiteśvara figure bearing the feature of Pretasantarpita type may be noticed in the collection of images at the Mahasthangarh Museum (Fig. 12). The deity stands in abhaṅga position and has Tārā and Sūcīmukha to right and Hayagrīva and Bhṛkūti to the left. The similar Mañjuśrī figures with Yamāri or Yamāntaka to the right of the deity have been noticed by Claudine Bautze-Picron.⁷⁷ The pot-bellied krodha Yamāntaka is two-armed and holding a weapon called mudgara. These types of Mañjuśrī figures, datable to 9th-10th centuries, are mainly found from the Nālandā, Gaya and Kurkihar regions as pointed out by Bautze-Picron. However, the most spectacular tantricised form of Mañjuśrī, known as Mañjuvajra (Fig 13) where the deity is three-faced and two-armed can be found at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and Rubin Museum of Art, New York.⁷⁸ The two images show the deification of Mañjuvajra Maṅḍala where the deity holds with his two primary hands vajra and prajñā, symbolized by bell. His remaining four hands carry sword, arrow, bow and night lotus. Both of the images of Mañjuvajra can be dated to c. 11th century and they are from Southeast Bengal. The point to be noted here is that the fearsome gods like Hayagrīva or Yamāntaka was given a secondary position in the images of Bodhisattva figure. Despite their marginal characters, we can notice that they, with their esoteric features, started appearing regularly beside the popular Bodhisattva figures. Their protective attributes gave them prominence in the pantheon.

With regards to the images of Tārā we can see a spectacular proliferation of different forms of the deity whose features were gradually departing from a Mahāyāna form and was assuming a tantra character. A particular four-faced and eight-armed form of Tārā, known as Vajratārā (Fig. 15) was becoming visible in the body of the Buddhist sculpture of Bengal. Each of her four faces

⁷⁶ Bhattacharyya, *Indian Buddhist Iconography*, pp. 128-29

⁷⁷ Claudine Bautze-Picron, "Some Aspects of the Mañjuśrī Iconography in Bihar from the 7th century Onwards", in *Tribus*, No. 38, 1989, p. pp. 72-77

⁷⁸ Hillary Anne Langberg, *Visualizing the Power of Wisdom: Mañjuvajra Maṅḍala, an Eleventh Century Pāla Period Sculpture from Bengal*, M.A Dissertation, 2013, University of Texas at Austin

has three eyes. The colours of her four faces starting from the left one are yellow, black, white and red. In her right hands she holds the vajra, the conch shell, the arrow and the varadā Mudrā, while with her left hands she holds the white lotus, the bow, the elephant goad, the noose and the Tarjani Mudrā.⁷⁹ Vajratārā is often represented in a full-blown lotus to demonstrate her position in a maṇḍala. A bronze image of the Vajratārā found from Faridpur has been listed by Bhattasali with the iconic eight petal lotus signifying its maṇḍala. The Vajratārā image (Fig. 15) from Bara, Birbhum, West Bengal, preserved in the State Archaeology Museum in Kolkata, West Bengal is noteworthy. Very few images of the deity are available. In one of the maṇḍalas prescribed in the *Niṣpannayogāvalī*, Vajratārā has been mentioned with vivid description of her arms and colours. Bhṛkūti and Aṣṭamahābhaya are two more tantricised forms of Tārā that can be found in the sculptural corpus. Aṣṭamahābhaya is a special form where the goddess is white and the distinguished feature is that she is surrounded by the ten goddesses originating from the ten syllables of Tara's mantra: *om tāre tuttāre svāhā*. Bhṛkūti on the other hand is yellow in colour and emanates from Amitābha. She is one-faced and four-armed, as per the description of *Sādhanamālā*. In her two right hands she shows varadā mudrā and carries rosary, while with her left hands she holds Tridandī and Kamaṇḍalu. The Bhṛkūtitārā (Fig. 14) in the Bangladesh National Museum however is eight-armed and three-faced wearing an upabīta or sacred thread. The hands of the deity are badly mutilated, except one left hand holding vajra. The deity is rather fearsome in appearance as one of her right hands holds a sword pointed upward. The Aṣṭamahābhaya Tārā at the Bangladesh National Museum seated in Ardhaparyāṅka attitude shows ten mahāvidya around the back panel. This is also a classic example of tantra where each of the syllables of Tārā's core mantra is being deified in the form of ten goddesses. Thus, many of the later forms of Tārā in eastern India, especially 9th century onwards shows generic marker of transition to a tantra phase.

Tantra religion as a whole and images as a part are integrally linked to the exhibition and celebration of power. This power was depicted in the images in a number of symbolical ways. It often stands against the compassionate principal of the Bodhisattva figures. Manifestation of power was portrayed through different iconographical markers. The power represented by the images might be gleaned through the two most significant aspects of the tantra images of Bengal

⁷⁹ Bhattasali, *Iconography of Brahmanical and Buddhist Images*, p. 49

- the exoteric and the esoteric, according to Claudine Bautze-Picron.⁸⁰ By drawing an example of Buddha seated in bhadrāsana position on a lion throne, Bautze-Picron has shown that for monks and the laity, the image carried different implications. By looking at the image the monks probably conceptualized Buddha a king of divine universe, while for the laity the Buddha was disseminating his wisdom to humans like them. The exoteric element in the Buddhist images is the immediate perception of the Buddha seated on a lion throne with his hands showing specific gesture. This exoteric impression of the Buddha depicts him as a teacher. The esoteric element, on the other hand, is the subconscious knowledge that the image essentially depicts a royal power, a mortal man who acquired power through his wisdom to rule the universe. In eastern India, in the context of the deity's psychic visualization by a worshipper described in the *Sādhanamālā*, the *Niṣpannayogāvalī* or the *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa*, there were images of Bodhisattvas exhibiting power by sitting on lion-throne. The representation of power visualized in the stone and metal sculptures had their own idioms. The lion and lion throne became a very instrumental idiom in the Buddhist art of Bengal which symbolized the sheer power of a deity. We can keenly note that in the images of Siṃhanāda Avalokiteśvara (Fig. 16) or Mañjuvara (Fig. 17), how the compassionate Bodhisattvas were conferred with power. Four sādhanas have been devoted to the worship of Siṃhanāda Avalokiteśvara. The deity is regarded by the Mahāyāna followers as the curer of all disease. The images of Siṃhanāda Avalokiteśvara, were installed in the mouth of the staircase leading to the entrance of the monasteries in Nepal. He is described as without any ornaments and clad in tiger skin and he sits on a lion in the attitude of rājalīāsana. His right hand holds a trident while his left hand holds a full blown lotus. Avalokiteśvara, a compassionate Bodhisattva thus became a protective figure exerting power by holding a weapon and mounting on a roaring lion. Similar figure of Mañjuvara riding on a roaring lion was common in the sculptural landscape of Bengal. The figures amply depicted a very powerful form of Mañjuśrī where the deity sits in Ardhaparyāṅka attitude displays the sentiment of Sṛṅgāra or amour very lavishly. His two hands are joined near his chest showing the Dharmacakra Mudrā. He holds the stalks of one or two lotuses on which there appears a *Prajñāpāramitā* manuscript.

The depiction of power through the images became more prominent through the protective deities worshipped for the safeguarding of wealth and the Buddhist monasteries. The cultural

⁸⁰ Claudine Bautze-Picron, "Images of Devotion and Power in South and Southeast Bengal", p. 164.

implication of these protective deities who are often found in wrathful and fearsome characteristics was closely tied with the political power struggle of early medieval Bengal.⁸¹ The study of these types of images must be contextualized in the political tension with neighbouring forces faced by the political authority of Bengal. Bengal's character as a regional nodal point in the south-east Asian and Tibetan route should be also taken into account to study the transport and survival of the culture associated with the fearsome deities in various countries bordering the Bay of Bengal and China. The region of Bengal has also been described as a 'melting pot' as several land routes passed through this region connecting different parts of Indian subcontinent. The maritime route crossed the Bay of Bengal from Tamluk and Chittagong connecting vast regions of south-east Asia. Monks from all over Asia as well as from Himalayan Range came here to join the Mahāvihāras or to pilgrim to the places visited by the Buddha. Indian monks too travelled from here to various parts of the sub-continent as well as to Southeast Asia and Tibet. Therefore, the connected regions of Southeast Asia where the cult of Mahākāla, Heruka/Hevajra, Mahāpratisarā, Yamāntaka (Fig. 19) etc. survived, could be surveyed to understand the actual social, political and cultural implications of these images.⁸² Three regions have been identified by Bautze-Picron which was developing relation with bordering countries. The first region is Odisha with a well-defined regional boundary. The second region stretched from Nālandā to Vikramśīla and continued up to Jagaddala and the third region is Lakhisarai along the banks of the Kiul River which flows northwards to the Ganges.⁸³

Lakhisarai yielded a number of Mahākāla images, the cultural continuity of which deity might also be found in Tibet and Xi Xia. The cult of Mahākāla probably travelled to these regions during the rule of Dali kingdom (10th – 13th centuries). Subsequently the Mahākāla images started to appear at the Yuan court as well as in Pagan and Indonesia. Mahākāla became a major protective deity in Tibet where he is venerated as the protector of Pavilion. The royal power at Yuan also

⁸¹ Claudine Bautze-Picron, "Buddhist Images of Power and Protection in East and Southeast Asia and their Eastern Indian Counterparts", in *Ajia Bukkyō-bijutsu Ronshū (South Asia II) (Post-Gupta to Pāla Dynasties) (Essays in Asian Buddhist Art)*, ed. Mori Masahide, Tokyo: Chūō-Kōron Bijutsu Shuppan Publishing Co., Ltd., 2021, p. 339

⁸² Bautze-Picron, 'Buddhist Images of Power and Protection in East and Southeast Asia and their Eastern Indian Counterparts', in *Ajia Bukkyō-bijutsu Ronshū (South Asia II) (Post-Gupta to Pāla Dynasties) (Essays in Asian Buddhist Art)*, ed. Mori Masahide, Tokyo: Chūō-Kōron Bijutsu Shuppan Publishing Co., Ltd., 2021, p. 339.

⁸³ *Ibid*, p. 341.

celebrated the cult of Mahākāla as a personal tutelary deity invoked for the purpose of protecting the royal power. Following the present-day cult associated with Yamāri, Heruka and Mahākāla, Bautze-Picron has pointed out the possibility that these deities were probably invoked in the Indian subcontinent for the purpose of protecting the monasteries and political institutions.⁸⁴ The *Sādhanamālā* has described Mahākāla as a ferocious god, generally worshipped in the tantra rite Marana and for the destruction of enemies. He is regarded as a terrible spirit and the Buddhist learner who is disobedient to his preceptor is cursed with the danger of Mahākāla. He carries Kartri and Kapāla in his right and left hands respectively. He displays fearsome expression in his face with bulging eyes. He is short height and stands on corpse and adorned with snake, human heads and skull (Fig. 18). He is the most powerful protector related to the Hevajra cycle of tantra.

Another goddess among the five protective Pañcarakṣā group whose sculpture often found in metal and stone medium, is Mahāpratisarā. Pañcarakṣā or a group of five protectress goddesses were very popular in India, Nepal and Tibet because of their special trait in defending the worshipper from the evil force. Mahāpratisarā is the principal goddess in the Pañcarakṣā group. GJR Mevissen has recorded at least five images of Mahāpratisarā from different regions of Bihar and Bengal including Mainamati and Kurkihar.⁸⁵ The iconography of the deity is prescribed in both *Sādhanamālā* and *Niṣpannayogāvalī*. She is either three faced, ten-armed or four-faced, eight-armed. The deity seats in the Ardhaparyāṅka or Sattvaparyāṅka mudrā. She holds with her left hands a bow, Parasu, Vajra and Tarjani while with her right hands she holds sword, Cakra, Triśūla and Arrow (Fig. 20). The Tarjani Mudrā, Vajra and several weapons in the hands of the deity are the characteristic feature of the wrathful tantra deities. The deity is also found in wide number in the central Java and central Asia probably drawing its origin from the eastern India. The cult of Mahāpratisarā probably travelled to Indonesia in 8th century by the visiting of a number of famous Indian Buddhist masters, including the monk Amoghavajra who translated Mahāpratisarādhāraṇī.⁸⁶ The spread of Mahāpratisarā cult in the Tang Empire in China and central Java can be also attributed to Amoghavajra who repeatedly chanted the Mahāpratisarādhāraṇī to

⁸⁴ Bautze-Picron, 'Images of Devotion and Power in South and Southeast Bengal', in Andrea Acri (ed), *Esoteric Buddhism in Medieval Maritime Asia*, Singapore: ISEAS Press, p. 180

⁸⁵ GJR Mevissen, "Images of Mahāpratisarā in Bengal: Their Iconographic Links with the Javanese, Central Asian and East Asian Images", in *Journal of Bengal Art*, Vol. 4, 1999, pp. 99-101

⁸⁶ *Ibid*, p. 117

ward off the terrible natural calamities. Despite the rise of multiple iconographies of the deity in different regions of Southeast Asia and China, the cult of Mahāpratisarā was evidently popular. The center of the Mahāpratisarā cult in eastern India was probably situated in the Mainamati region as most of the bronze image of the deity were found from here. The metal image of the deity for the personal collection of the monks also attested the fact that she was widely revered by the monks for the purpose of protection from calamities and danger.

The female goddess known as Sitātapatrā or Sitātapatrā Aparājitā was another invincible protective deity widely venerated by the Buddhist monks in eastern India. She has bulging eyes which displays anger. An emanation from the Vairocana, she carries in her three right hands the cakra, the goad and the bow, and in the three left hands the white Vajra, the arrow and the noose with the Tarjani (Fig. 21). The Cakra, Vajra and Tarjani perhaps depict the deity's ferocious character. Goddess Aparājitā, a closely related goddess of Sitātapatrā, shows Buddhism's grave tension with Brahmanism. The antagonism towards Brahmanical order rose to its height mainly in the area which were directly connected to the life of Buddha i.e. Gaya. The region yielded an excellent sculpture of Aparājitā who is trampling upon Ganesa. The deity also appears as a protective deity in the east direction of Aṣṭabhuja Kurukullā and guards the southern gate of the Kurukullā maṇḍala. In her four-armed form she carries staff and goad in her two right hands, while with her two left hands she holds bell and noose. In the Cundā dhāraṇī Aparājitā placed in the Agni corner to guard the deity. In a very short sadhana dedicated to the Aparājitā she is described as two-armed and one-faced deity trampling upon Ganeśa. Her right hand is raised, showing slapping gesture or chapetadāna (Fig. 22). Her left hand carries the noose with raised index finger against her chest. The figure of Aparājitā is mostly found from the Nālandā and Gaya regions in the present-day Indian state of Bihar. The deity along with Trailokyavajaya, shows the social and religious tension between two of the major religious orders of early medieval time.

The embodiment of the dhāraṇī in the form of different deities signified another important cultural aspect of tantra images. Dhāraṇīs are mystical Buddhist literature with no literal meaning. The strings of words, when uttered correctly, are believed to have conferred power to the practitioner. These meaningless syllables became one of the principal features of Tantra elements in Buddhism. The important Buddhist tantra goddess who represents the embodiment of Cundā dhāraṇī is Cundā. She is affiliated to the transcendental Buddha Vairocana. She is known by her

different names like Cundrā, Candrā, Candā, and Cundāvajrī. Benoytosh Bhattacharyya has shown that her mantra in the *Sādhanamālā* is *Om Cāle Cule Cunde Svāhā* which indicates that the deity is known as Cundā. The *Niṣpannayogāvalī* mentions that she is one of the twelve dhāraṇī deity. She is one faced but can be two, four, sixteen, eighteen or twenty-six armed. Guhyasamājatantra, one of the earliest tantra texts mentions her as Cundāvajri, probably indicating her Vajrayāna feature. Cundā has been also mentioned in the 7th century text *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa* as Candri. She was also regularly mentioned in the tantra texts like Śikṣāsamuccaya of Śāntideva and *Niṣpannayogāvalī* of Abhayākaragupta. A particular eighteen-armed image of Cundā (Fig. 23) is preserved at the Varendra Research Museum with the deity holding in her seven right arms Varadā Mudrā, Vajra, Cakra, club, dagger and rosary. Her lefts seven left hands hold vessel, axe trident bow, dagger, scepter and an indistinct object. Her principal two hands show the Dharmacakra Mudrā. The pedestal of the sculpture depicts some warring figures. In a Prajñāpāramitā manuscript of 1015 CE it is mentioned that there was a temple of Cundā at Pattikera region. This leads us to believe that Southeast Bengal was a region where Cundā cult was very popular.

Among the laukika deities that appeared in the sculptural landscape of Bengal, Parṇasabarī is significant for its various anti-epidemic feats. The worship of Parṇasabarī prevents the outbreak of epidemic and assures safety to the terrorized people. In her mantra she has been given the epithet of Piśācī (female demon) which might also characterize her as a demi-god. In two of her sādhanās she has been described as an emanation of either Akṣobhya or Amoghasiddhi. The *Sādhanamālā* has described that she is decked in all sort of ornaments, and bear a garment of leaves. She looks arrogant and carries in her three right hands the Vajra, Paraśu and arrow, while her three left hands hold Tarjani with noose, cluster of leaves and the bow.

Her headdress is decorated with flowers and image of Akṣobhya. She tramples under her feet the vighnas and threatens the host of other vighnas with the fist of her left arm exhibiting Tarjani. The Parṇasabarī image (Fig. 24) preserved at the Bangladesh National Museum is three-faced and six-handed. The deity with Tarjani Mudrā and bulging eyes is terrible in appearance. She tramples upon the two corpses. She probably used to be venerated by the forest dwellers communities like the Sabaras as her nomenclature suggests. Her inevitable forest link can also be discerned from her leaf attributes. As a preventer of epidemics, she was probably worshipped by the people with their laukika or mundane needs of preventing epidemics. The deity was probably

incorporated in the Buddhist pantheon from the autochthonous cult. The find place of the Parṇasābarī image, i.e. Vajrayogini has to be taken into account with immense significance as the place was profoundly connected to Buddhist tantra by the huge amounts of tantra artifacts it yielded. The Vajrayogini village, in the broader ambit of Vikrampur and Munshiganj area showed varied traits of Buddhist tantrism with the production of several dhāraṇī and protective deities. The area, an important political center of the Chandra dynasty, thus became a viable center of Buddhist tantra. Among the other deities, well known in the Mahāyāna pantheon and worshipped for the purpose of the fulfilling the laukika needs like abundance and cure are Jāngulī, Vasudhārā (Fig. 25) and Hārīti.⁸⁷ The array of laukika deities invoked for the different worldly plight signified that the social anxiety and tension reached to peak during this period.

The imagery landscape of Buddhist tantra was also greatly occupied by several wrathful deities known as krodha-vighnāntakas. The gradual development of this group of deities has been excellently studied by Rob Linrothe who has shown the three distinctive phases of their development.⁸⁸ In the first phase the krodha-vighnāntaka is a subordinate to the Bodhisattvas who were worshipped with dhāraṇī prayers for the purpose of removing misfortune. The wrathful deities were given the task of gathering the sentient beings to whom the Bodhisattva preaches. This phase also witnessed the composition of important kriya and caryā class of tantra texts like the *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa* and the *Mahāvairocana-Abhisamboshi-Sūtra*. This phase continued in India till 12th century and the principal wrathful deities of this phase were Hayagrīva, Yamāntaka (Fig. 26), Mahābala and Vajrapuruṣa. In the second phase the member of the krodha-vighnāntaka group became independent in nature with the appearance of their own attendants and their placement in the centrally ordered Buddhist maṇḍala. Their major task during this phase was conversion, aversion to misfortune and destruction of obstacles. This phase also corresponds to the rise of the yoga class of tantra with the composition of signatory texts like *Sarvatathāgatattvasaṃgraha* etc. The principal wrathful deities of this phase, along with the continuation of previous deities, were Yamāntaka and Vajrapāṇi-Trailokyavijaya. The third phase marked the elevation of the status of the krodha-vighnāntakas as the most important deities of

⁸⁷ Nupur Dasgupta, “Faith, Healing and Serpent Goddesses: Exploring the Threshold between the Ritual and the Medical in the cults of Jāngulī-Manasā,” in *Journal of Bengal Art*, Vo. 21, 2016, pp. 25-36.

⁸⁸ Rob Linrothe, *Ruthless Compassion: Wrathful Deities in the Early Indo-Tibetan Esoteric Buddhist Art*, Boston: Sambhala, 1999, pp. 13-14

Buddhist tantra. They appeared at the centre of principal manadala and they embodied the power of Buddha, mahāsukha or supreme bliss and the reality itself. This phase was corresponded by the composition of the anuttara yoga tantra class of literature like *Hevajratantra* and *Cakrasaṃvaratantra*. The principal wrathful deities of this phase were Heruka, Hevajra and Samvara.

Linrothe has marked a sharp distinction between the basic characters of Bodhisattva figures like Mañjuśrī, Avalokiteśvara, Maitreya etc. and the wrathful deities. He argues that in order to grasp the underlying nature of esoteric Buddhism the wrathful figures prove to be more relevant than the Bodhisattva figures.⁸⁹ One of the primary defining characteristics of late esoteric Buddhism is the emergence of this group of deities along with their horrific symbolism. The Sanskrit term vighnāntaka literally means the destroyer of the obstacles. These obstacles, in the parlance of esoteric Buddhism might refer to an external threat of demon and disease as well as the internal narrow human traits of sloth or lust which come in the way of enlightenment. Therefore, the krodha-vighnāntakas were not only the mere guards of the external threat, they perhaps also helped a tantra practitioner to overcome his characteristic shortcomings and achieve enlightenment. However, these supreme attributes of the wrathful deities were absent in phase one and only started to unfold in the late esoteric Buddhism. The earliest cultural precedents of these deities might be traced back in the tradition of Lokpāla, Dvarapāla, Kṣhetrapāla, Dharmapāla etc. who acted as the guard of the many directions in a temple or a monastery complex.⁹⁰ The Lokpālas like Dhṛtaraṣṭra, Virudhaka, Virupākṣa and Vaisrāvana correspond to the east, south, west and north respectively. The Lokpālas might be traced back in the early Mahāyāna phase with individual character appearing in the inscription of Bharhut (1st century BCE). The root of these figures was engraved in the yakṣa figures that were incorporated into Buddhism in the early phase. The dvārapālas or the gate guardians were even lower in the hierarchy. Their task was also to drive the enemies away and their appearance was aggressive with one hand raised, naked body, bulging eyes and ferocious facial expression. The later pala (literally means protector) figures were Kṣhetrapāla, Dharmapāla and Dikpālas. The principal function of the Kṣhetrapāla was the protection of fields or plots of land. Dikpālas were the guardians of the eight cardinal directions. They were

⁸⁹ Linrothe, *Ruthless Compassion*, p. 6

⁹⁰ Linrothe, *Ruthless Compassion*, pp. 20-22

appropriated by both Buddhism and Brahmanism. The Dharmapālas were the protector of the Buddha's teachings. They belonged to the class of fully enlightened Buddha and were also referred to as krodha-vighnāntakas. The Buddhist wrathful deities like Mahākāla, Yamāntaka and Hayagrīva are seldom referred to as Dharmapāla.

The elevation of the status of the krodha-vighnāntakas was particularly a phenomenon of late esoteric Buddhism when Heruka, Hevajra and Samvara assumed the status equal to enlightened Bodhisattva and featured as the central deity in the *maṇḍala*. This phenomenon might also find its textual parallel in the *Hevajra Tantra* and *Samvarodaya Tantra* where Buddha and Bodhisattva have minor role and the chief interlocutor is Vajrasattva who is also considered to be the Ādi Buddha. Samvara and Hevajra are both two different forms of Heruka. There are three principal forms of Saṃvara – two-armed, six-armed and twelve-armed (Fig. 27). The twelve-armed form of the deity is most extant in eastern India. The two-armed form of the deity holds bell and vajra and stands in ālidha attitude. *Sādhanamālā* has described that the twelve-armed form of the deity stands in ālidha posture stampedes on the corpse of Bhairava and Kālarātri. His principal two arms carry the vajra and the bell and in the yab-yum position she embraces her śakti Vajravārāhī. With the second pair of his hands, he carries the elephant skin from which the blood trickles down. In the remaining four hands he carries damaru, axe, chopper and trident. The four left hands show the vajra-marked khatvaṅga, the skull cap full of blood, the vajra marked noose and the severed head of Brahma.

The female consort of Heruka and Samvara are Nairātmā and Vajravārāhī respectively. These wrathful female deities also appeared as independent figures for multiple times in the sculptural corpus of Bengal. Very few images of Heruka-Nairātmā⁹¹ or Samvara-Vajravārāhī⁹² in consortium position are found from Bengal. When in consortium, Heruka and Nairātmā both dance on yogīns. The characteristic of Nairātmā as described in the *Hevajratāntra* is that she holds a knife, a skull and a khatvaṅga. The deity also shares a lot of features with Vajrayogīnī. In the *Niṣpannayogāvalī*, goddess Nairātmā has been dedicated a maṇḍala where she features in the center. An emanation of Akṣobhya, the deity dances in Ardhaparyāṅka Mudrā. Her face looks

⁹¹ Linrothe, *Ruthless Compassion*, p. 270

⁹² Bautze-Picron, 'Buddhist Images of Power and Protection in East and Southeast Asia and their Eastern Indian Counterparts', p. 355

terrible with bare fangs and protruding tongue. Like the description of *Sādhanamālā* the deity (Fig. 29) carries the Kartri in the right hand and bears the kapāla and khatvaṅga in the left. The word Nairātmā means without soul and might be another name of Sūṅya. The Sūṅya gradually assumed the form of a deity, who gives the Bodhisattva eternal bliss when they are in consortium.

4.5 Images in the painted manuscripts

The painted manuscripts of Pāla period occupy an important place in the history of Indian art. They are very rich in their subject and artistic merit. The available number of painted manuscripts is abundant and as some of them mention the name of the Mahāvihāra as the place where they were written, it is instrumental in tracing the tantra culture prevailing within the literate section residing at these monasteries. Besides the stone and metal sculptures these paintings also unveil an important dimension of tantra elements in Buddhism both by the subject matter of the texts as well as the painted figures of the Buddhist deities. Except for a few, all the texts are the copies of Buddhist sacred texts and was produced during the Pāla period in the eastern India. The majority of the texts carry the name of the Pāla rulers while some of them mention the names of the rulers of other contemporary dynasties of Bengal like Chandras and Barmans. Some of them also mention the dates in Vikrama and Saka dating system. At least 25 dated painted manuscript texts have been recorded by Sarasi Kumar Saraswati from the end of the 10th century to the end of 12th century.⁹³ The number of total manuscripts paintings is near 400 as listed by Saraswati. Wooden boards have been used as covers to protect the manuscripts and paintings are visible even on them. But Saraswati has argued that paintings on the cover might be a later addition and are stylistically different from the paintings of Pāla period.

The abundance of Buddhist manuscripts from 10th century onwards owed its origin to the early Buddhist tradition of book worship.⁹⁴ The early Mahāyāna doctrinal literature was an important asset to the Buddhist community who abided by the rules outlined in this literature. The earliest evidence of using a manuscript for discussion and debating upon the doctrinal concepts comes from a second century Gāndharā relief where monks are seen holding a manuscript and

⁹³ S.K. Saraswati, *Pal Juger Chittrakala* (in Bengali), Kolkata: Ananda Publishers, 1978, pp. 37-54

⁹⁴ Sarita Khettry, "Cult of the Book in Buddhism: A Study Based on the Archaeological Material" *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, Vol. 78, 2018, pp. 1002-1009.

discussing its content.⁹⁵ The visual evidence from the Ellora cave in 7th century CE also indicates that book was being used by the Buddhist community as a cultic object. The two standing goddesses at the cave 6 of Ellora are Mahāmāyūrī and Bhṛkūti. Below the feet of goddess Mahāmāyūrī a small figure of a monk was depicted and he is engaged in performing a ritual with a manuscript. Jinah Kim has suggested that the manuscript could possibly be of the Mahāmāyūrī sutra. In the absence of any textual instruction with this image, the visual message conveyed to the people, inevitably tied the worship of Mahāmāyūrī with the reading of manuscript. The panel at Ellora seems to have indicated a ‘semiotic relationship’ between the book and the goddess. The Chinese translation of Mahāmāyūrī sutra by Amoghavajra in 8th century portrays several mystical feats of Mahāmāyūrī dhāraṇī which was recited by the monks to perform a miracle. Later in Nepal and eastern Indian tradition, Mahāmāyūrī became a member of the five protective deities known as Pañcarakṣā.

Manuscripts as a cultic object witnessed further development with the emerging importance of a Mahāyāna sūtra named *Aṣṭasahasrikā Prajñāpāramitā sūtra*. It deals with the most fundamental Mahāyāna doctrine of a number of Mahāyāna schools of thoughts. The text composed during the early century of the Common Era, assumed considerable popularity in the early medieval time. The sutra has been translated into Chinese for at least six times in eight hundred years and the edition that is widely available in Pala Bengal loosely corresponds to Danapala’s translation.⁹⁶ Prajñāpāramitā was one of the most circulated and venerated doctrines in early medieval Bengal and Tāranātha described that it was extensively propagated during the reign of Dharmapāla. The cultic practice of Prajñāpāramitā was already extant since 5th century as accounted by Faxien. The cult evidently had a Mahāyāna links as Faxien saw that the adherents of Mahāyāna Buddhism worshipped Prajñāpāramitā, Avalokiteśvara and Mañjuśrī. The text itself explains that Prajñāpāramitā should be treated with utmost respect like a mother by all the Buddhas because enlightenment originates from her. Thus, the text assumed the character or mother-goddess from an early period. With the emergence of esoteric Buddhism in eastern India, the female or Prajñā principal became important for the performance of rituals and thus Prajñāpāramitā was represented as book goddess. In the manuscripts of early medieval Bengal, goddess

⁹⁵ Jinah Kim, *Receptacle of the Sacred: Illustrated Manuscripts and the Buddhist Book Cult in South Asia*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013, p. 25

⁹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 29.

Prajñāpāramitā featured as a beautifully ornamented goddess and became the symbol of the entire manuscript. The manuscript also appeared as a significant cultic object with the principal deity and at the pedestal of several Buddhist sculpture, especially that of Mañjuśrī. The manuscript worship culture has also been recorded from a particular terracotta plaque found during the excavation at Jagajjivanpur, Malda which depicts a book placed on a full-blown lotus.⁹⁷

In the later phase of Buddhist tantra in Bengal, the tantra deities like Heruka and Cakrasamvara along with their consorts started to appear in the manuscripts of Aṣṭasahasrikā Prajñāpāramitā. The Pañcatathāgata figures, as described in the Guhyasamājantra with their colours and specific Mudrā, also regularly featured in these manuscripts. This phenomenon of tantra iconography leads us to believe that the donors of the manuscripts as well as the practitioners were actively leaning towards the tantra texts.⁹⁸ The manuscripts were designed as book-maṇḍalas to enable the practitioners to have quick means of achieving enlightenment. The incorporation of the esoteric deities was not the mere embodiment of the grotesque, but a visual strategy of the Buddhist masters for invoking the doctrinal value of great tradition like the concept of Sūnya.⁹⁹ The iconographies projected in the Buddhist manuscripts of eastern India are constituted by a historical process where the localized cult and personal vision developed gradually. The images painted in the Prajñāpāramitā manuscript had specific cultic purpose that can be assessed in its historical context.

Along with the dated manuscripts there are also some painted manuscripts of eastern India without any dates due to the damages. Although the dates are missing, from the comparative analysis it becomes evident that they probably belonged to the Pāla period. The impact of the eastern Indian School of art extended up to Nepal since in the paintings of Nepal the same artistic language can be perceived.¹⁰⁰ The description of these painted texts with their possible bearings of Pāla style of art has also been registered by Rajendralal Mitra.¹⁰¹ In this book, a description can

⁹⁷ Sarita Khettry, 'An Interesting Plaque from Jagjivanpur Monastery of Sri Mahendrapaladeva', in *Proceeding of Indian History Congress*, Vol. 64, 2003, pp. 261-268

⁹⁸ Jinah Kim, *Receptacle of the Sacred*, p. 149

⁹⁹ Jinah Kim, 'Transcendental Practices: Iconographic Innovations of the Indian Esoteric Buddhism', in *History of Religion*, Vol. 54, No. 1, pp. 35-39.

¹⁰⁰ Saraswati, *Pal Juger Chittrakala*, p. 33

¹⁰¹ R.L. Mitra, *Sanskrit Buddhist Literature of Nepal*, Kolkata: Baptist Mission Press, 1882

be found of the voluminous ancient scripts collected by B.H. Hodgson from Nepal. S.K. Saraswati has divided this huge corpus of painted manuscripts in three categories – 1) the dated painted manuscripts of eastern India, 2) the undated painted manuscripts of eastern India and 3) the dated painted manuscripts of Nepal. Among the 28 dated manuscripts there are at least 14 manuscripts of Aṣṭasahasrikā Prajñāpāramitā, two of Karandavyuha, seven of Pañcarakṣā and one titled as Dharini Grantha, one as Dharma Grantha and one as Kālacakra Tantra. Among the 14 undated painted manuscripts of eastern India four Prajñāpāramitā texts and one Tantra text are noteworthy. Among the dated painted manuscripts of Nepal there are also overwhelming number of Prajñāpāramitā texts, as many as eleven. At least three Pañcarakṣā texts also feature in the last category.

Aṣṭasahasrikā Prajñāpāramitā texts and Pañcarakṣā texts constituted the major portion of the corpus of the dated manuscripts and their primacy is to be noted here since both of them played a pivotal role in Buddhist tantra. In the *Sādhanamālā* and the *Niṣpannayogāvalī* we have seen that Prajñāpāramitā, the sacred text, has been deified with physical attributions. The Pañcarakṣā deities were also assigned utmost importance as the protector from evil spirits. The Pañcarakṣā deities like Mahāpratisarā, Mahāmāyūrī etc. have been devoted with numerous Sādhanā and in the *Niṣpannayogāvalī* also they feature in multiple Maṇḍalas. Two Aṣṭasahasrikā Prajñāpāramitā texts can be assigned to the 6th and 7th regnal year of Mahipāla I and the first one is stated to be produced in Nālandā. At least four Prajñāpāramitā text can be assigned to the 15th, 18th, 36th and 41st regnal year of Rāmapāladeva and one mentioned Nālandā Mahāvihāra as its writing place. Two Prajñāpāramitā texts were produced in the 4th and 15th year of Gopala III and the last one mentioned Vikramshila Mahāvihāra as place of its writing. Apart from the Pala rulers, some of the texts also mention the Deva and Chandra rulers. A Pañcarakṣā text has stated that it was produced during the reign of Govindachandra but did not mention any date. Two Prajñāpāramitā texts have mentioned the name of Deva rulers Harivarmadeva and the texts were produced in the 8th and 19th year of him. A Karandavyuha text describing the universal compassion of Avalokiteśvara was written in Jayasree Mahāvihāra of Nepal in the 2nd regnal year of Rāmapāladeva.

The wide range of paintings in the manuscripts of Buddhist texts helps us understand Buddhist tantrism vividly. A painting of Mahāpratisarā,¹⁰² chief among the Pañcarakṣā, appears in one of the texts belonging to the 14th regnal year of Nayapāladeva. The colour of her figure is golden and she is sitting in Vajraparyāṅka pose on a lotus and the upper part of her body expresses ease. The deity is three-faced and eight-armed. In her four right hands she holds sword, Vajra, Parasu and shows Varada Mudrā, while in the four left hands she holds circle, flower, an indistinct object and Pash. But this iconography does not match with that of *Sādhanamālā*.

The painting of Nairātmā Yoginī¹⁰³ is found in a Pañcarakṣā Text from the 14th regnal year of Nayapāladeva. The colour of the deity is grey and she stands in the Pratyālīḍha pose. She is short in height, her face expresses anger, her brown hair is oriented upwards and she wears a Kapālamālā or garland of forehead in her head. She is two-armed and three-eyed and she wears a tiger skin. The same painting can be found ten times in the same text. Two Sādhanās in the *Sādhanamālā* describe her form, which is in many respects similar to the form of Vajravārāhī with the Katri and the *kapāla*, the principal point of difference being the position of the corpse which forms their *vāhana*. When it lies on its chest it is Vajravārāhī, but if it lies on its back, the goddess is Nairātmā. Though in the painting we do not find any Vahana. In the two-armed form of Hevajra Nairātmā appears as his Prajñā. In *Sādhanamālā* it is stated that she is blue in colour, has brown hair rising upwards, and bears the image of Akṣobhya on her crown. Her face looks terrible with bare fangs, and protruding tongue and she carries the Katri in the right hand and bears the *kapāla* and the Khatbhanga in the left. Her three eyes are red and round and she is endowed with the five auspicious symbols¹⁰⁴. Though all the attributions of the deity as described in *Sādhanamālā* cannot be found in the painting, the deity in her appearance and expression and hair colour can be identified as Nairātmā.

A bunch of paintings of future Buddha Maitreya feature in different texts. A painting of Maitreya Buddha is noteworthy from the 14th regnal year of Nayapala. Here Buddha is sitting with his face pointed towards left side and she wears a red Sanghati. The back of his head glitters but there is no Uṣṇīsa in his head. Up in the left-hand corner of the painting a mountain is visible and

¹⁰² Saraswati, *Pal Juger Chittrakala*, p. 44

¹⁰³ Ibid, p. 50

¹⁰⁴ Bhattacharyya (ed), *Sādhanamāla*, p. 451

in the mountain there are a Kukkuta, a stūpa and a burning pyre. Due the presence of Kukkuta, Saraswati has identified it with the Kukkutapada Vihāra. Another painting of Maitreya belongs to 4th regnal year of Gomindrapāladeva. In this painting he sits in Ardhaparyāṅka style and holds akṣasūtra in his right hand and a Nāgakeśara flower in the left.¹⁰⁵ According to Buddhist lore, Kāśhyapa was waiting for Maitreya in a stūpa up on the mountain. When Maitreya reached earth from Tushita heaven, Kāśhyapa handed over the cloths of Buddha to the Maitreya and he became the ruling Buddha of present day.

Paintings of Maḥāśrī Tārā feature in a number of texts. One can be dated to the 8th regnal year of Haribarmadeva of Barman dynasty.¹⁰⁶ The white clothed deity is seated on the throne in sukhāsana pose. Her two hands show the Darmachakrapravartana mudrā. Another Maḥāśrī Tārā can be dated to the 9th regnal year of Govindapāla.¹⁰⁷ Here the deity is yellow coloured and she is sitting in Sukhāsana pose on a throne. Again, her two hands show Dharmachakrapravartana Mudrā. An attendant deity is engaged in serving the Main deity. From the 36th regnal year of Ramapaladeva there is another painting of Maḥasri Tārā.¹⁰⁸ Here the deity is seated on a throne in Sukhāsana pose and her two hands show Dharmachakrapravartana Mudrā. Two attendant deities appear in front of her in devotion.

A very interesting painting of Vajrasattva is to be noted from the 9th regnal year of Govindapāla. He is seated in Vajraparyāṅka pose and his right hand holds a Vajra and left-hand rests on his lap and holds a bell. His complexion is shiny white and he is decked in ornaments¹⁰⁹. Vajrasattva, being a regular development of Bodhisattva Vajrapāṇi emanating from the Dhyānī Buddha Akṣobhya is a little earlier than Vajraḍhara, although Vajraḍhara and Vajrasattva are sometimes inextricably mixed up.¹¹⁰ In the Vajrasattva Maṇḍala of *Niṣpannayogāvalī*, Vajradhara is the principal deity.¹¹¹ Vajrasattva is sometimes considered as the sixth Dhyānī Buddha who is generally regarded as the priest of the five Dhyānī Buddha. He is usually represented with the

¹⁰⁵ Saraswati, *Pal Juger Chittrakala*, p. 107

¹⁰⁶ Saraswati, *Pal Juger Chittrakala*, p. 80

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, p. 86

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, p. 175

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, p. 92

¹¹⁰ Bhattacharya, *Indian Buddhist Iconography*, p. 43

¹¹¹ Bhattacharyya (ed), *Niṣpannayogāvalī*, p. 8

priestly symbols like Vajra and the Ghanta. He is also an embodiment of the five Skandhas collectively and Benoytosh Bhattacharya argues that he is undoubtedly a later addition to the pantheon of northern Buddhism¹¹². He was not only represented in the Stūpa like other Dhyānī Buddha, but independent shrines are dedicated to his worship. His worship is always performed in secret and was not open to all.¹¹³ He carries the Vajra in his right hand and bell in the left hand as can be seen in the painting.

An interesting painting of Kurukulla features in the Aṣṭasahasrikā Prajñāpāramitā text from 9th regnal year of Govindapāla. The deity sits in Vajraparyāṅka pose and her upper part has been presented with ease. His colour is red, four-handed and with her main two hands she holds an arrow and a bow. Her other right-hand rests on his lap, while the left hand holds a lotus. The painted or sculptural representation of Kurukulla is very rare in eastern India. The four-handed form of the deity has been described in the Sādhanā no. 171, 172, 177, 178, 184 and 188 of the *Sādhanamālā*. Kurukulla is said to confer success in tantra rite of Vasikarana or the rite of enchanting men, women and ministers, even kings. When the mantra of Kurukulla is muttered for ten thousand times all men are believed to be bewitched.¹¹⁴

From the 4th regnal year of Gomindapāladeva hails a painting of Vajrapāṇi in a Prajñāpāramitā text. He is blue in colour and seated on a lotus in Lalitāsana pose. His right hand holds a vajra and left-hand rests on his knee. He is attended by two subsidiary deities – Yamāntaka and Hayagrīva¹¹⁵. An important painting of Lokanātha also hails from the 4th regnal year of Gomindrapaladeva. The deity is seated in Lalitāsana pose and is white in colour. In his right hand he shows Varada Mudrā and in the left hand he holds a full blossomed lotus. Shiny red light radiates from the back of his head and the background is black.¹¹⁶ In *Sādhanamālā* four Sādhanās are devoted to the worship of Lokanātha who is a form of Avalokiteśvara. He is single in three Sādhanās and one Sādhanā adds that Lokanātha should be accompanied by eight Bodhisattvas and

¹¹² Ibid, p. 48

¹¹³ Ibid, p. 75

¹¹⁴ Bhattacharyya (ed), *Niṣpannayogāvalī*, p. 147

¹¹⁵ Saraswati, *Pal Juger Chittrakala*, p. 110

¹¹⁶ Saraswati, *Pal Juger Chittrakala*, p. 113.

four goddesses. He has two hands and carries the lotus in the left hand and exhibits the Varadā pose in the right.¹¹⁷

A painting of Prajñāpāramitā features in a Prajñāpāramitā text which can be dated to the 15th regnal year of Rāmapāla. The painting appears on the cover of the text. The deity is seated in the Vajraparyāṅka pose on an ornamented throne. His main two hands show the Dharmacakrapravartana Mudrā. His other additional right hand holds Akṣamālā and book in the left hand. A painting of Vasudhārā features in a Aṣṭasahasrikā Prajñāpāramitā text belonging to the 36th regnal year of Rāmapāladeva. The six-handed deity is seated in Lalitasana pose. Her three right hands show Varada Mudrā, holds jewel and show Vandanā Mudrā while three left hands hold Bhadrāghata, crops and book¹¹⁸.

The paintings of the Buddhist deities occurring in the Buddhist sacred texts, some of which had been produced in the Mahāvihāras, falling under the reign of Pāla rulers are significant in understanding the Buddhist culture of tantrism prevailing in the Mahāvihāra and among the literate society. Figures of Buddhist deities like Maitreya, Vajrasattva, Tārā, and Prajñāpāramitā appear regularly in these manuscripts like the stone and metal sculptures. The presence of deities like Kurukulla and Nairātmā in the manuscripts, who are otherwise very rare, lead us to understand how their worship and supremacy has been projected by the scribes of the texts. The painted representation of the fierce demon goddesses like Nairātmā and Kurukulla is significant here since they used to be hailed for enchanting other parties. Moreover, almost maintaining convergence with their supposed iconography as described in *Sādhanamālā* also indicates that a standard iconography started to be followed by the painters in 11th and 12th centuries. It is to be noted that the Prajñāpāramitā texts belonging to the reign of Rāmapāladeva (1082-1124 CE) and Gopala III (1129-1143 CE) belong to the same period of *Sādhanamālā* and *Niṣpannayogāvalī* and there was certain affinity with the tantra culture represented by them.

Conclusion

This survey of the specific Buddhist stone and metal images discovered from the different regions of early medieval greater Bengal from the 8th - 12th centuries CE indicate the devotional

¹¹⁷ Bhattacharyya (ed), *Sadhanamala*, p. 49.

¹¹⁸ Saraswati, *Pal Juger Chittrakala*, p. 117.

trends and ritual traditions. It was in the Magadha and its surrounding regions that we see the Bodhisattva images like Avalokiteśvara and Mañjuśrī from the 4th century CE onward, tracing the roots from the older tradition. Eastern regions in Bengal witnessed the late development of the Buddhist art from the post-Gupta period. The wrathful figures associated with the Buddhist tantra like Heruka, Hevajra, Parṇasābarī were found in larger numbers from the eastern Bengal. Whereas in the Magadha region, especially in Nālandā and Bodh Gaya, tension between Buddhism and Brahmanism can be noted through the images of Trailokyavijaya, Aparājitā and other images which may indicate the growing inclination toward the emergence of tantra elements within Mahāyāna. On the other hand, however, we also note the frequent mismatch between the iconography of the physical images and their description in the *Sādhanamālā* and the *Niṣpannayogāvalī*. This trend may indicate the existence of two separate realms of iconography. The textual sources of the *Sādhanamālā* and the *Niṣpannayogāvalī* belonged to 11th and 12th century respectively while the images started to be produced much earlier. The presence of a standard iconography for each deity was already there much ahead of the composition of these texts. Therefore, the corpus of images is to be assessed as an independent source, and considered as heralds of the tantra practices as they were not necessarily following the prescription of the texts. Rather the texts may be considered as recording the ritual, iconographical and devotional patterns already evolved in practice.

The Bodhisattva images began to exhibit specific features which were hitherto absent. These features included the subsidiary wrathful deities as attendants and vajra motif on the sculptures. These additions and embellished features indicated that the cult of wrathful protective deities was on the rise. Indeed, the figures of Hevajra and Saṃvara later started appearing independently and assumed similar status as the Bodhisattvas. The Bodhisattva figures too assumed specific tantricised forms like Mañjuvajra in the case of Mañjuśrī and Vajratārā in the case of Tārā. The tantra forms of the Bodhisattva figures indicated that the compassionate deities of the Mahāyāna were assuming new characteristics. The cultural, and social practices represented by the laukika and protective deities are of great importance. The images of Parṇasābarī, Mahāpratisarā and Sitātapatrā correspond to the actual social concerns and needs of the laity which may have been extended to include the monk community. The cult of specific protective deities like Mārīcī, Yamāntaka and Mahākāla emerged rapidly, probably due to the urgency felt by the monastic community to safeguard the monasteries from external attacks and danger. The need to

invoke the protective deities indicates the anxiety of the Buddhist community, probably emanating from a deep-rooted social tension. The protective images were also extensively portrayed in the painted manuscripts of Pañcarakṣā and Prajñāpāramitā. The images may be considered to carry the history of a culture that was deep - rooted in the regional – local history of early medieval Bengal which were absorbed and manifested in varied forms later in the medieval times. Many of the feminine conceptions of deities of the Buddhist pantheon were later absorbed into the Śākta pantheon of medieval Bengal. For example, the cult of the Buddhist Tārā was assimilated into the cult of the Śākta Tārā and the serpent deity Jāngulī may have been absorbed into the Manasā cult. Traces of the tantra tradition in Buddhism thus culminated in several heterodox cults of medieval Bengal. The final trajectory of this history of Buddhist tantra in the given context has been discussed in the concluding chapter.



Figure 1 Mārīcī, Shariatpur, 10th century, Bangladesh National Museum



Figure 2 Mārīcī, Vikrampur, 10th century, Varendra Research Museum



Figure 3 Heruka, Comilla, 10th century, Bangladesh National Museum



Figure 4 Heruka, Comilla, 9th century, Mainamati Museum



Figure 5 Jambhala, Shirajganj, 9th century, Mahasthangarh Museum



Figure 6 Jambhala, Bhanpur, 10th century, Varendra Research Museum



Figure 7 Prajñāpāramitā, Malda, 12th Century, Malda Museum



Figure 8 Akṣobhya, Munsiganj, 11th century, Bangladesh National Museum



Figure 9 Akṣobhya, Gopalganj, 10th century, Bangladesh National Museum



Figure 10 Akṣobhya, Joypurhat, 10th century, Mahasthangarh Museum



Figure 11 Vajrasattva, Bhoj Vihara, Mainamati, 9th century, Mainamati Museum



Figure 12 Avalokiteśvara with Preta Sūcīmukha and Hayagrīva, Namuja, 9th century, Mahasthangarh Museum



Figure 13, Mañjuvajra, Southeast Bengal, 11th Century, Rubin Museum of Art, New York, Photo Courtesy of Hillary A. Langberg



Figure 14 Bhṛkūtītārā, Munshiganj, 11th century, Bangladesh National Museum



Figure 15 Vajratārā, Bara, Birbhum, 12th Century, CASTEI



Figure 16 Siṃhanāda Avalokiteśvara, Gaya, 10th century, Patna Museum



Figure 17 Mañjuvara, Talanda, 10th century, Varendra Research Museum



Figure 18 Mahākāla or Yamāri? Vikrampur, 10th century, Varendra Research Museum



Figure 19 Yamāntaka, Nālandā, 10th century, Photo Courtesy – Huntington Archive



Figure 20 Mahāpratisarā, Munshiganj, 10th Century, Bangladesh National Museum



Figure 21 Sitātapatrā (Bronze), Comilla, 9th Century, Bangladesh National Museum



Figure 22 Aparājitā, Gaya, 8th Century, Patna Museum



Figure 23 Cuṇḍā, Niyamatpur, 10th Century, Varendra Research Museum



Figure 24, Parṇaśabarī, Vajrayogini, 10th Century, Bangladesh National Museum

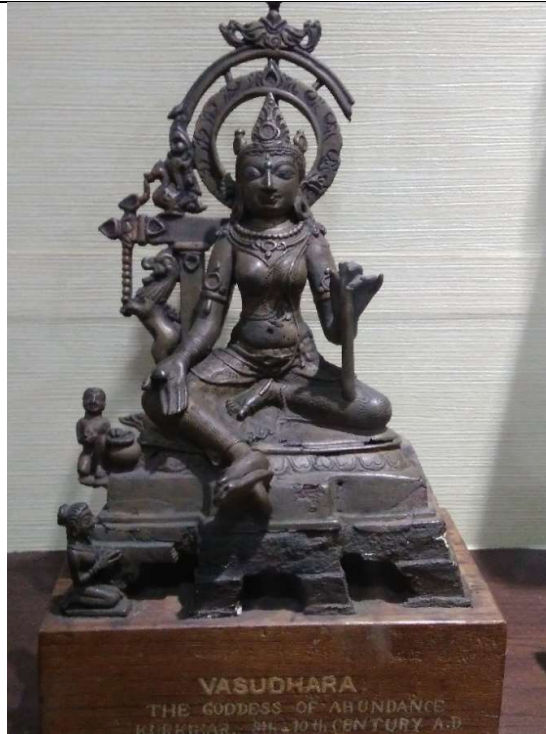


Figure 25 Vasudhārā, Kurkihar, 10th Century, Patna Museum

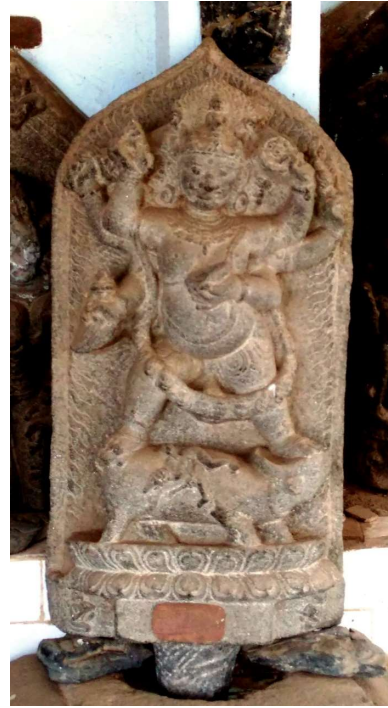


Figure 26 Yamāntaka, Bangarh, 10th Century, Ashok Nandi Collection



Figure 27 Saṃvara, Pala Bengal, 11th Century, Photo Courtesy – Huntington



Figure 28 Trailokyavijaya (Bronze), Nalanda, 7th Century, Patna Museum



Figure 29 Nairātmā, Jagaddala Vihara, 7th Century, Paharpur Museum



Figure 30 Kurukullā in a Prajñāpāramitā Manuscript of 12th century Bengal, Courtesy – MET Museum



Figure 31 Śyāmā Tārā, in a Prajñāpāramitā Manuscript of 12th century Bengal, Courtesy – MET Museum

Note: All the Photographs are taken by the present researcher except Fig. 13, 19, 27, 30 and 31. The photo courtesy of the said pictures has been given under them.

Conclusion

In the present study we have tried to review the origin and development of tantric tendencies in Buddhism in early medieval greater Bengal. Our study has focused on an extensive region in the present-day West Bengal, Bangladesh and some parts of Bihar. The region of Magadha was the heartland of Buddhism in the eastern India from a very early period. Under the Mauryan rule in the 3rd century BCE, Buddhism expanded into Puṇḍravardhana (northern Bengal). Presumably Tāmralipta on the southeastern coast also became a centre since this phase as we note how Buddhism was evidently on the rise during the Sunga – Kusana period. Subsequently in the early medieval times, Northern Bengal and a few parts of southern Bihar, including Pātaliputra, Nālandā, Vikramśīla, and Bodh Gaya came under the suzerainty of the Pāla rule. These regions constituted a single political unit for the time being, an experience which forged many cultural commonalities that impacted rising Buddhist trends in the region. So far as the sacred geography of Buddhism in eastern India is concerned, the regions from Nālandā to Harikela (Chatgaon) emerged as a cultural corridor with connections to the northern routes through the sub-Himalayan terais moving out towards Tibet and China via northern Bihar, Nepal and borders of Kāmarūpa. Intimate ties developed throughout these regions as Chinese pilgrims, Tibetan and Southeast Asian travelers and traders who plied more northern routes came down to greater Bengal, especially visiting the Buddhist centres around Magadha, Aṅga, and Bengal proper. Buddhist material remains and cultural markers distributed throughout this vast region bear similarities highlighting the common cultural space. These connected regions beyond the present-day boundaries of West Bengal - Bangladesh have been considered in the present study as greater Bengal.¹ Buddhism in early medieval Bengal therefore, cannot be taken as an isolated religious phenomenon, but as to be viewed within this geographical expanse. Therefore, the study of the origin and development of Buddhist tantra in our select context required us to focus on two different kinds of spatial settings. The main spatial context constitutes this greater Bengal. But we need to track the other scene comprising the spatial network connecting greater Bengal with the Himalayan belt, Nepal, Tibet, and China in the north, and Southeast Asian mainland across the Bay of Bengal in the east. Networks of pilgrimage, cultural exchanges, and trade impacted the ways in which Buddhism emerged and

¹ The reason for using this phrase has been explained in the Introduction. When we are using the phrase ‘early medieval Bengal’, the context is early medieval greater Bengal.

evolved in Bengal. In fact, these exchanges lent dynamism to the processes of efflorescence of the phenomenon we characterize as Buddhist tantra in the given context.

Puṇḍravardhana became the eastern most frontier region of the Maurya Empire. The label inscriptions on the railings of Sanchi recorded two donors from the Puṇḍravardhana who probably traveled through the routes passing through Magadha and reaching Sanchi. Tāmralipta was a vibrant port of eastern India, facilitating overseas trade across the Bay of Bengal. Faxian's 5th century CE account confirms the port as a busy centre.² In the early medieval period, Buddhist sacred sites started appearing beyond Puṇḍravardhana and Tāmralipta, in the sub-regions like Samatāṭa, Vaṅga, eastern Rāḍha (Murshidabad region), deltaic Bengal, even in Tripura and southwestern Bengal (Midnapore) where the remnants of multiple Buddhist centers have been located through archaeological investigations. Along with Nālandā, Vikramśīla this new Buddhist space in Bengal opened the way for further contact up to Arakan, Myanmar and Java in the Southeast Asia while in the north connections with Tibet was established since the 7th century CE.

Tantra emerged as a notable phenomenon within all religious sects in early medieval India in general and was very much visible in greater Bengal. However, it would be fallacious to perceive tantra as a uniform phenomenon, impacting all the religious sects similarly. Buddhism, Śaivism, Śāktism, and Vaiṣṇavism, each had very distinctive history and this history underwent multiple trajectories of development. Buddhist tantra emerged through long and complex historical processes. Buddhism in eastern India in general and greater Bengal specifically evolved through a very long timespan possibly since the 3rd century BCE, during the Maurya phase as indicated by textual reference. During the Gupta period regional Buddhism bore distinct trends of Mahāyāna. Mahāyāna characteristics were predominant in architectural features of the stupa, *vihāra*, and the same is noticeable in the dedicatory inscriptions featuring Buddhism. The Gupta inscriptions and those of their subordinates recorded land grants to the Mahāyāna congregations. The seals and sealings of the Gupta and post-Gupta periods from the *vihāras* and *mahāvihāras* of Nālandā and other centres showed distinctive trends of east Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism. The accounts of Faxian (5th century CE), Xuanzang, Yijing, and Sheng Chi (7th and early 8th centuries) who visited the Buddhist

² Li Ronxi, "The Journey of the Eminent Monk Faxian," *Lives of Great Monks and Nuns*, Barkley: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, 2002, pp. 157-163.

monasteries of Bengal almost unequivocally underlined the Mahāyāna nature of Buddhism and expressed deep reverence for the rule of the Vinaya.

Certain trends however started to become apparent in the Buddhist landscape of greater Bengal particularly from the 8th century CE onwards during the Pāla regime. These trends, sometimes projecting radically different and transgressive characteristics of rituals, practices, and philosophical ideals from orthodox Buddhism, probably owed their origin to Mahāyāna Buddhism in terms of the pantheon and ultimate goal of realizing the nature of *śūnya* or voidness.³ Some of the preceding notions of Mahāyāna sūtra and rakṣā literature like the dhāraṇīs or the magical spells contained the earliest ritual and idealistic elements of the Mantrayāna/Vajrayāna or Tantric Buddhism. These trends merged into a pattern which gradually and accompanied by other influences took the shape of tantra within Buddhism. The literary and material remains of early medieval Buddhism in Bengal showed characteristic trends of modifying the Mahāyāna idea and rituals and adoption of esoteric practices. Despite continuing earlier Mahāyāna form to some extent, a particularly distinct trend of Buddhism developed certain features characterized by magic, mysticism, sorcery, and psychic ritual practice, often in strong opposition to the traditional Buddhist ideas. The key ritual objects and concepts of this peculiar practice, often termed tantric, included mantra, mūdrā, maṇḍala and dhāraṇī. In fact, some of these features can be traced at a much earlier stage, around 1st century BCE - 2nd century CE.⁴ Tracing and pinpointing the exact stages of this complex process of evolution is difficult in the context of early medieval Bengal, especially in the light of obscure routes of transmission of these ideas. The ambiguity not only lay in the routes of transmission of different ‘tantric’ ideas but also in defining comprehensively under what context these ideas come to be considered as ‘tantric’. There is also significant disagreement among scholars in defining tantric Buddhism holistically since its manifestation in present-day Tibet and Southeast Asia showed a variety of religious trends. Admittedly, our attempt at piecing together a history of the evolution of Buddhist tantra in early medieval Bengal is fraught with these difficulties. Nevertheless, we have tried to point out a variety of possibilities that prepared the ground for the tantric turn in Buddhism in early medieval Bengal.

³ Benoytosh Bhattacharyya, *An Introduction to the Buddhist Esotericism* [1932], Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1989 (reprint), p. 33.

⁴ Ingo Strauch, “The evolution of the Buddhist *rakṣā* genre in the Light of New Evidence from Gandhara: The *Manasvi-nāgarāja-sūtra* from the Bajaur collection of Kharoṣṭhī Manuscripts,” in *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London*, Vol. 77, No. 1, p. 69.

The origin of Tantric Buddhism was connected to a number of contemporary socio-political factors of early medieval Bengal. The linguistic and ritualistic feature of the esoteric Buddhism, as Ronald M. Davidson has already shown in his seminal work, was metaphorically responding to the complex power matrix of the early medieval social setup.⁵ The early medieval regional state formation was marked by an integrative process that led to bridging the gap between monastic Buddhism and the non-sedentary tribal community in remote areas. The interaction of the monastic community with the aboriginals might have created a fluid space in Buddhism which gave way to the deities like Parṇasābarī and Caṇḍālī. The deification of Ḍombī and her projection in consortium with Heruka also signified that the lower strata cult was entering the sacred space of Buddhism. The lower-caste background of many of the Buddhist Siddhācāryas and their doctrinal challenge towards the established monastic order signifies that the process of assimilation and incorporation were not bereft of subtle tension. The origin of tantric Buddhism and Tantra as a whole can be traced back to the lower social background which came in close proximity with the both Brahmanism and Buddhism. The nature of this assimilation can be understood in comparison to the Purāṇic assimilation of marginal elements in the greater Brahmanical scheme of early medieval Bengal as shown by Kunal Chakrabarti.⁶ A similar process of absorption may be noticed in the *maṇḍalas* of *Niṣpannayogāvalī* (12th century) which housed the deities of lower strata in the outer circle as door-keepers. The tantric texts dedicated to the demoniac protective deities like Hevajra and Cakrasaṃvara were considered to be the lowest of the tantric practice or *anuttarayoga tantra*. The most powerful royal houses of early medieval Bengal like the Pālas and the Chandras, despite proclaiming themselves as Buddhist by their epithets, dedicated very few numbers of their land grants to the Buddhist vihāras. Personal religious preference of the rulers of early medieval Bengal, with the exception of Śaśāṅka, proved to be futile in advancing the cause of Buddhism. Since the Gupta period, Buddhism received patronage from the sub - regional ruling dynasties like Khaḍgas, Early Devas, Later Devas, and Chandras. However, the Pālas feature less in such patronage scene and under the Senas we notice a complete lacuna. We can hardly draw a direct connection between the royal patronage and the development of Tantric Buddhism much beyond 10th century CE. The sustenance of Buddhism, which became

⁵ Ronald, M. Davidson, *Indian Esoteric Buddhism: A Social History of Tantric Movement*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2002, p. 3.

⁶ Kunal Chakrabarti, *Religious Process the Making of a Regional Tradition*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 12.

overwhelmingly tantra based with time therefore depended on the community on non – royal patrons. But the evidence for this is also scanty beyond the 10th century CE.

We need to consider several issues prevailing both inside and outside Bengal in order to trace the origin of tantric Buddhism in early medieval Bengal. The region had already witnessed the prevalence of Mahāyāna Buddhism during 6th - 7th centuries CE. Reference to Buddhist monastic congregations in the land grant charters as well as the eye-witness accounts left by Xuanzang and Yijing leave no doubt about the fact. At the same time, the overall Buddhist ritual pattern was changing as can be observed in the esoteric rituals prescribed in the *Guhyasamāja Tantra* (6th century CE) and the *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa* (7th century CE). The Anuttara yoga texts of the *Hevajra Tantra* and the *Cakrasaṃvara Tantra*, possibly the products of eastern India, further highlight the rise of esoteric rituals and ideology of Buddhism in the late 8th - early 9th centuries CE. Similar phenomena of ritualistic developments were also noted in other contemporary Brahmanical religions like Śaivism and Śāktism which showed dominant strains of tantrism in regions like Central India, Maharastra and Andhra. However, Buddhist tantra cannot be regarded as a by-product of tantric Śaivism as argued by Alexis Sanderson.⁷ Textual evidence showed that Buddhist tantra originated independently and the elements of tantra can be traced to Mahāyāna ideas and rituals, as we have already discussed. Moreover, it has been argued that traits from grassroots rituals and practices also entered into the ritual - ideal arena of Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophy and practices. These strains of ideas and rituals got remodeled into the idealistic parameters that has come to be perceived as tantra within Buddhism. In other words, Mahāyāna Buddhism accommodated a host of rituals and practices which were inclined towards modifications leaning toward tantric features. Thus, Mahāyāna ideas and practices created a fluid space facilitating the assimilation and absorption of ideas. The process of assimilation and adoption has to be observed as a complex process of negotiation, involving myriad ways of negotiation, not all of which can be pinned down specifically. One has to account for the way in which religious and cultural elements of the indigenous grassroots were reciprocating with the soteriological scheme of Mahāyāna Buddhism. The process of state formation had evidently brought in its wake socio-political tension especially in the peripheral regions of early medieval greater Bengal which is indirectly

⁷ Alexis Sanderson, “The Śaiva Age: The Rise and Dominance of Śaivism during the Early Medieval Period,” in Shingo Einoo (ed), *Genesis and Development of Tantrism*, Tokyo: Institute of Oriental Culture, University of Tokyo, 2009, p. 124.

reflected in literary sources like Sandhyākar Nandī's *Rāmacarita*⁸ and the Bengal *Purāṇas* (albeit late sources they reflect the social tensions attended by expansion of polities, agrarian economy and tentative emergence of brāhmanical social order /varṇa – jāti system) and the epigraphic sources reflecting on subregional polities and agrarian communities. The social environment also reflected religious hostility where the grassroot ideals and cults encountered challenges from classical faith and vice versa.⁹ This social tension can be traced in Sandhyākar Nandī's *Rāmacharita*. However, there are debates about the social cause of the Kaivartta revolt which is the main theme of this literary work.¹⁰ The text has been earlier studied by R.S. Sharma and then by Ryosuke Furui.¹¹ Romila Thapar has offered a critical analysis of the *carita* literature like *Rāmacarita* to show that the biographer wanted to portray the centrality of the Pāla monarchs in the *sāmanta* politics of Varendri (northern Bengal) region.¹² Although the political content of the revolt has been prioritized in recent historiography, the narrative and epigraphic records point to the social background quite clearly as Ryosuke Furui has reviewed afresh. So far as the evidence of the Bengal *Purāṇas* are concerned, the 13th century text of *Bṛhaddharma Purāṇa* referred to the formation of varṇa-jāti in Bengal.¹³ This may be seen as reflecting prior encounters between the non-varṇa inhabitants of the peripheral regions and the infiltration of the varṇa ideology along with the expansion of statal control into the sub-regions of Bengal. Buddhist faith might have also gone through modifications in such settings. Thus,

⁸ The social mobility of the fishermen caste Kaivartta gaining landholdings in the light of *Rāmacarita* has been brought forth by Sayantani Pal, "Revisiting the Kaivartta Revolt: Locating the Emergence of a Caste," in Osmund Bopearachchi and Suchandra Ghosh (eds), *Early Indian History and Beyond: Essays in Honour of B.D. Chattopadhyaya*, Delhi: Primus Books, 2019, p. 515.

⁹ For the political tension in Pala Bengal see Ryosuke Furui, "Subordinate Rulers Under the Pālas: Their diverse origins and shifting power relations with the king," in *Indian Economic and the Social History Review*, Vol. 54, No. 3 (2017), pp. 339-359. The inter-religious hostility in early medieval India has been brilliantly portrayed by Alexis Sanderson, "Tolerance, Exclusivity, Inclusivity and Persecution in Indian Religion during the Early Medieval Period," in Aweek Sarkar and John Mackinson (eds), *Honoris Causa: Essays in Honour of Aweek Sarkar*, London: Allen Lane, 2015, pp. 155-224. For a brilliant survey of hostility between Buddhism and Brahmanism see Abhishek S. Amar, "Buddhist Response to Brahmana Challenges in Medieval India: Bodhgayā and Gayā," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, Vol. 22, No. 1, pp. 155-185.

¹⁰ Sayantani Pal, "Revisiting the Kaivartta Revolt," and Kunal Chakrabarti, "Brahmanical Hegemony and the Oppressed Social Groups Rethinking the 'Kaivartta Revolt'," in O. Bopearachchi and S. Ghosh (eds), *Early Indian History and Beyond: Essays in Honour of B.D. Chattopadhyaya*, Delhi: Primus Books, 2019, p. 515.

¹¹ Ryosuke Furui, "Characteristics of Kaivartta Rebellion Delineated from the *Rāmacarita*," in *IHC: Proceedings 75th Session*, 2014, pp. 93-98

¹² Romila Thapar, *The Past Before Us: Historical Tradition of Early North India*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013, pp. 498-503.

¹³ The proliferation of caste groups and the two-fold varṇa system were mentioned in the Bengal *Purāṇas* like *Bṛhaddharma* and *Devībhāgavata*. For details see, Ryosuke Furui, "Social Life: Issues of Varna-Jati System," p. 57.

while the roots of tantra in Buddhism can be traced much earlier as discussed already, the regional socio-political setting also lent characteristics to Buddhist tantra in greater Bengal which bore some distinctive elements.

To go back to the early processes for the rise of tantra, we have traced back the roots of the ideological and ritual precursors of esoteric Buddhism to the several early Mahāyāna texts and ritual traditions. Early Mahāyāna texts like the *Prajñāpāramitā* (1st century BCE),¹⁴ the *Gaṇḍavyūha Sūtra* (2nd century CE)¹⁵ and the texts under the rakṣā genre were believed to have contained the earliest germ of tantric Buddhism. Some of the earliest birchbark manuscripts of these texts, datable between 1st century BCE to 2nd century CE, were discovered from the Gāndhāra region and beyond.¹⁶ The region of Gilgit in the present-day Afghanistan, particularly yielded a number of early manuscripts of Mahāyāna sutra literature like the *Uṣṇīsavijaya-dhāraṇī*¹⁷ and the *Samādhirājā sūtra*¹⁸ which indicate the inception of mantra and dhāraṇī practices in the north-western part of the sub-continent. The intermingling of different cultural elements in Buddhist literature lay in the long standing religio-cultural interaction between India and China through the Central Asian corridor resulting in the translation of a lot of sūtras in Chinese.¹⁹ These texts were probably written, copied, translated and propagated by the Mūlasarvāstivādīn and Sarvāstivādīn communities and reached China to be adopted within Chinese Mahāyāna. The inception of the mantra and dhāraṇī practices occurred for the first time in these Buddhist texts. While the *Prajñāpāramitā* and the *Gaṇḍavyūha Sūtra* included the early versions of mantra and maṇḍala, the rakṣā genre literature like *Manasvi-nāgarājā-Sūtra* and *Mahāmāyūrī-Vidyārajñī Sūtra* contained the earliest elements of the dhāraṇī practices.²⁰ The practice of using magical spells for the purpose of

¹⁴ Seishi Karashima, “Was the Aṣṭasahasrikā Prajñāpāramitā compiled in Gāndhāra in Gāndhārī?”, in *ARIRAB*, vol XVI (2013), pp. 171-188.

¹⁵ Douglas Osto, “Proto-Tantric Element in the Gaṇḍavyūha Sutra”, in *Journal of Religious History*, vol. 33, no. 2, pp. 165-177.

¹⁶ Stefan Baums, “Truth and Scripture in Early Buddhism: Categorical Reduction as Exegetical Method in Ancient Gāndhāra and Beyond,” in Tansen Sen (ed), *Buddhism Across Asia: Networks of Material, Intellectual and Cultural Exchange*, Vol. I, Singapore: ISEAS, 2014, p. 19.

¹⁷ Oskar von Hinubar, “Magic Protection in the Pālola Shāhī Kingdom: History and Context of the Rakṣā Text and Dhāraṇī in the 7th century Gilgit”, in Claudio Cicuzza (ed), *Katā me Rakkhā, Katā me Parittā: Protecting the Protective Texts and Manuscripts, Proceedings of the second International Pali Studies Week Paris 2016*, Bangkok and Lumbini: Fragile Palm Leaver Foundation, 2018, p. 218.

¹⁸ Andrew Skilton, “The Gilgit Manuscript of the Samādhirājā sūtra,” in *The Central Asiatic Journal*, vol. 44, no. 1, pp. 67-86.

¹⁹ Tansen Sen, *Buddhism, Diplomacy and Trade: The Realignment of Sino-Indian Relations 600-1400*, Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2003, pp. 1-15.

²⁰ Peter Skilling, “The Rakṣā Literature of the Srāvakayāna,” in *Journal of the Pali Text Society*, 16, pp. 109-82.

protection of the saṃgha and monkish community from imminent dangers like epidemics, snakebite and natural disasters can be traced back to 1st century BCE – 2nd century CE when Buddhism was expanding to the unknown forest and mountain tracts of north-western part of the Indian subcontinent and beyond. These ideas and practices continued to a greater extent and led to the origin of tantric Buddhism through degrees of modifications. The *Guhyasamāja tantra* (5th/6th century CE), the *Prajñāpāyoviniścayasiddhi*, the *Jñanasiddhi* (8th century CE) and the *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa* (6th/7th century CE) might be considered as intermediate texts which gradually paved the way to the tantric turn in Buddhism.

Archaeological remains, including the vihāras as sites of Buddhist practices and sculpted images as well as the Buddhist texts substantiate the context of the rise of Buddhist tantra and also form the background for the phenomenon. We have sought to understand the prevalence of Buddhism with overtone of tantra in the light of this huge body of evidence. We have looked at the region as lying in the crossroads of inter-regional exchange with Southeast and Central Asia since the 5th century CE.²¹ Situated in a nodal point of a very important trade network with China and Southeast Asia it was on the network that not only served as the transit route for the transportation of trade commodities but also became an important corridor for the interaction and transmission of diverse religious traditions and cults. Our region therefore received different cultural influences which probably facilitated the efflorescence of Buddhist tantra practice. Samatāṭa (Comilla and Noakhali) and Harikela (coastal Chittagong) formed the border through which interactions with Southeast Asia occurred.²² The striking similarities in the maṇḍala-like architectural feature of the Paharpur and Vikramśīla and that of the temple of Borobudur in Central Java (8th – 9th century CE in Indonesia) indicate the transmission of not only sacred religious ideas but also the knowledge of sacred architecture and technology.²³ Needless to say, the networks of exchange extended to the inland Central Asia and connected Malay Archipelago, and was also greatly facilitated by the maritime network in the entire Bay of Bengal and South China Sea regions. The exchange process was not unidirectional but may

²¹ Rila Mukherjee, “From Mountain Fastness to Coastal Kingdoms: The Contours of Medieval Bay of Bengal” in John Deyell and Rila Mukherjee (eds), *From Mountain Fastness to Coastal Kingdoms: Hard Money and ‘Cashless’ Economies in the Medieval Bay of Bengal World*, New York: Routledge, 2020, p. 30.

²² Suchandra Ghosh, “Understanding the Economic Networks and Linkages of an Expanded Harikela,” in John Deyell and Rila Mukherjee (eds), *From Mountain Fastness to Coastal Kingdoms: Hard Money and ‘Cashless’ Economies in the Medieval Bay of Bengal World*, New York: Routledge, 2020, p. 87.

²³ Swati Chemburkar, “Stūpa to Maṇḍala: Tracing a Buddhist Architectural Development from Kesariya to Borobudur to Tabo,” in *Pacific World*, Vol. 3, No. 20, pp. 169-221.

have led to absorption of ideas and rituals from cultures in contact beyond the borders of greater Bengal. The origin of the essentially shamanic - ritual elements in tantric Buddhism therefore should not only be traced to Bengal's indigenous grassroots traditions. Bengal's location in the cultural crossroads gave impetus for sharing and absorbing ideas and practices with both the inland Central Asia and regions lying in the coastal Bay of Bengal. The close ties with Arakan and Siam in terms of inscriptional corpus²⁴ and textual transmission²⁵ can be also gleaned from a number of evidence. Many of the tantric Buddhist deities like Yamāntaka, Mahākāla, Marīcī and Sitāpatrā were widely venerated and worshipped by the royal houses of Yunnan, Burma and Java for protective purposes.²⁶ Their cults survived in Southeast Asia throughout the medieval period. The sculptural counterparts of these deities and their textual descriptions in early medieval Bengal indicate that Bengal and Southeast Asia had begun to witness a shared paradigm of tantric Buddhism from the early medieval phase.

The maritime route through Bay of Bengal was not the only avenue for interactions between Bengal and Southeast Asia. Our region's close proximity with the Himalayan and sub-Himalayan belt of Nepal, Bhutan and Kamarupa – Cachar also facilitated contacts with Central and Eastern Asia. These networks especially ran through the sub-regions of Puṇḍravardhana and further east, through the kingdom of Kāmarupa. This extended zone constituted the northern corridor for cultural exchanges which survived even during the Sultanate period.²⁷ Tibetan emissaries and pilgrims in search of Buddhist manuscripts, doctrines, and holy images flocked in large numbers in early medieval Buddhist vihāras like Nālandā, Vikramśīla, Paharpur etc. Indian monks like Padmasambhava, Śāntarakṣita, Kamalaśīla, Dharmakīrti, and Atīśa visited Tibet by the royal invitation to teach Buddhist doctrines.²⁸ The spread and survival of Buddhism in Nepal and Tibet on the valleys of the southern Himalayas and the plateau of northern Himalayas respectively bear evidence of religious and cultural exchanges between the Himalayan areas with Bengal. Both the eastern Himalayas and the western Himalayan

²⁴ E.H. Johnstone, "Some Sanskrit Inscription of Arakan," in *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London*, Vol. 11, No. 2, pp. 357-385.

²⁵ Peter Skilling, "Geographies of Intertextualities: Buddhist Literature in Pre-modern Siam," in *Aseanie*, Vol. 19, 2007, pp. 91-112.

²⁶ Claudine Bautze-Picron, "Images of Devotion and Power in South and Southeast Bengal," in Andrea Acri (ed), *Esoteric Buddhism in Medieval Maritime Asia*, Singapore: ISEAS Press, 2012, p. 241.

²⁷ For the distinctive character and evolution of Newari Buddhism see, M.R. Allen, "Buddhism Without Monks: The Vajrayana Religion of the Newars of the Kathmandu Valley," in *South Asia 2*, pp. 1-14, and Rajendralal Mitra, *Sanskrit Buddhist Literature of Nepal*, Calcutta: The Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1882, pp. iii-xliv.

²⁸ The journey of these scholars to Tibet has been discussed in the second chapter

(Kumaon) regions contributed to the admixture of different elements in Buddhism which emerged in early Medieval Bengal. It is difficult to pinpoint exactly which of the specific features of Buddhist tantra owed their origin to a specific region, especially in view of the uncharted intermingling of different ideas. It is indeed difficult to determine the trajectory of sacred ideas moving from one region to the other. It must be contended that the spread of tantric Buddhism in the connected regions around Bay of Bengal cannot be attributed to a diffusionist process from eastern India to the outer regions, but was the result of amalgamation of varied ideas and customs prevalent in the borderlands and hinterlands of South, Southeast and Central Asia. Contacts as observed in the donation of land in Nālandā to king Balaputradeva of Suvarṇadvīpa by King Devapāla indicate such possibilities. The intra-Asian connectedness probably opened new horizons for early medieval Buddhism in greater Bengal which assimilated and absorbed diverse kinds of rituals, practices, and ideas from beyond the given territorial limits. Incidentally, the rise of tantric Buddhism in early medieval Bengal almost coincided with the establishment of a southern route of the Silk Road from Yunnan to Bengal via Burma connecting the Deccan and Kashmir around the 7th century CE.²⁹ This sets one to ponder on the possibility of interconnection between the two phenomena of early development from within Mahāyāna and the later modifications arising out of far-flung cultural contacts.

The Buddhist vihāras of early medieval Bengal showed minimal but distinctive trends of tantric Buddhism. The material remains of the vihāras, especially the cruciform architectural pattern was similar to the Vajradhātu maṇḍala prescribed in the tantric Buddhist texts like *Sarvatathāgatattvasamgraha*.³⁰ The maṇḍala-like ground plan of the central temple of the Buddhist vihāra became a distinctive trend in the early medieval Buddhist monastic complexes like Salban Vihāra, Ānanda Vihāra, Rupban Mura, Vikramśīla, Paharpur and several other Buddhist edifices. As noted already, the feature of specific tantric deities creating *maṇḍala*-like shapes housing central and four peripheral deities indicates a strong tantric idealism behind the architectural design. These ideas are reinforced by the depictions of several graha, dikpāla, apotropaic, and astral deities in the niches of the cruciform temples at Paharpur, Vikramsila,

²⁹ Bin Yang, “Horses, Silver, and Cowries: Yunnan in Global Perspective”, in *Journal of World History*, Vol. 15, No. 3, p. 290.

³⁰ Do-Kyun Kwon, *Sarva Tathāgata Tattva Samgraha: Compendium of All the Tathāgatas: A Study of its Origin, Structure and Teachings*, Unpublished PhD Thesis, SOAS, University of London, 2002, 41-65.

and Salban Vihāra as already discussed.³¹ The maṇḍala became the most sacred diagram of tantric Buddhism which was regularly drawn on paṭa (cloth) or ground for the worship or invocation of any tantric deities. The maṇḍalas embodied the Buddhist cosmogenic idea of the different worlds. Maṇḍalas were also instrumental in protecting the Buddhist vihāras from mundane dangers like epidemics and attack by the enemies. Textual references of Buddhist maṇḍala also occur frequently in kriyā tantric texts like the *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa* and *Anuttara yoga* texts like the *Hevajratantra*. The pattern of the maṇḍalaic vihāra was also in vogue in the architectural design of the Buddhist vihāra and temple in Southeast Asia³² indicating the pattern of influences.

As discussed, the representations of dhāraṇī images often found engraved on stone among the material remains of the Buddhist vihāras provides further proof of the impact of tantra on architectural and ritualistic designing of the monuments. The dhāraṇī stone in the early medieval context replaced the relics or dharmadhātu and became the central sacred idea on which a stūpa was made. Drawing reference from the dhāraṇī stones in the early medieval Buddhist vihāras of Lalitagiri and Udaygiri, Umakant Mishra has shown that under esoteric Buddhism the *Pratityasamutpāda dhāraṇī* or *Vimaloṣṇīṣa dhāraṇī* represented Vajradhātu which replaced dharmadhātu in the stupa.³³ In the context of early medieval Bengal such dhāraṇīs engraved on terracotta tablets and stones were found from the excavated remains at Nālandā, Vikramśīla, and Paharpur signifying that the sacred tantric Buddhist ideas were gaining coinage in the Buddhist vihāras. The dhāraṇī stone or tablets in the Buddhist vihāras and the textual equivalents occurred frequently in the early medieval Buddhist literature bearing the testimony that vihāras were gradually adopting the practice of tantric rites with faith in the supernatural efficacy of rituals and incantations.

Looking beyond the material culture of the Buddhist vihāras, the Buddhist scholarly writings also reveal similar tendencies which reflect modifications in the intellectual culture of the vihāra, as we have noted already. Several tantric commentaries and exegetical texts were attributed to the Buddhist pandits residing at the reputed vihāras s like Vikramśīla. Nālandā,

³¹ Gerd J.R. Mevissen, “Dikpālas and Grahas in Paharpur in Context of Contemporaneous Pan-Indian Temple Imagery”, in Gerd J.R. Mevissen and Arundhuti Banerji (eds), *Prajñādhāra, Essays on Asian Art, History, Epigraphy and Culture in Honour of Gouriswar Bhattacharya*, New Delhi.

³² Swati Chemburkar, “Stūpa to Maṇḍala: Tracing a Buddhist Architectural Development from Kesariya to Borobudur to Tabo,” p. 171.

³³ Umakant Mishra, “Continuity and Change in the Sacred Landscape of the Buddhist Sites of Udaygiri, Odisha,” in Himanshu Prabha Ray (ed.), *Negotiating Cultural Identity*, New Delhi: Routledge, 2016, p. 154.

Somapura and Jagaddala. These textual traditions crossed the boundaries of our region to become widely venerated along with the masters in Tibet and Southeast Asia. Religious commentaries and ritual manuals composed by resident monks of Vikramśīla like Abhayakaragupta and Atīśa Dīpaṅkara suggest that at the turn of the 11th century CE the monastic academic culture recognized and gave way to the tantric consecration practice. Deviating from and transgressing the normative Vinaya rule, the monastic complexes were gradually registering increasing ritual complexities. Whether the transgressive sexual initiation process was practiced in the monastic complexes cannot be confirmed with certainty. Nevertheless, the presence of itinerant monks and ascetics, dwelling in the forested area has been repeatedly mentioned in the ritual texts.³⁴ By all evidence the Buddhist ritual practices assumed complex character and were not probably confined to the monastic community exclusively. Tantra and the admixture of heterodox elements became a visible characteristic of Buddhism in early medieval greater Bengal.

We have surveyed a few Sanskrit Buddhist texts of the early medieval Bengal in order to understand the philosophical base and the complex perspective of Buddhist ritual and practices. Our reading of the literary source has revealed that the magical, mystical and sometimes supernatural notions and practices, referred to in these texts prove that Buddhism was gradually deviating from the orthodox Mahāyāna ideas. The genesis of these ideas and practices might be rooted in a number of factors including Bengal's own diverse indigenous tradition. The majority of the scholarship has indicated this possibility by pointing to the repeated featuring of lower strata terminologies like Mātangi, Candālī, Dombī, etc. in the tantric Buddhist textual corpus.³⁵ Simultaneously, the possibility of the influence of the sub-Himalayan and Southeast Asian culture and practice cannot be completely ruled out. The sub-Himalayan (Nepal, Bhutan, Tibet) and Southeast Asian regions yielded some of the earliest manuscripts available of tantric Buddhist texts. The trajectory of development of tantric Buddhism in early medieval Bengal can be keenly observed in an early, middle and later period texts. The early texts like the *Prajñāpāramitā* (1st century BCE) and the *Guhyasamājatantra* (5th century CE) showed the early characteristics of mantra, dhāraṇī and a Buddhist pantheon under pañcatathāgata family. The consecutive tantric Buddhist literature of the middle period like the *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa* (7th/8th century CE), the *Tārāmūlakalpa*, the *Cakrasaṃvaratantra*

³⁴ Isabella Onians, *Tantric Buddhist Apologetics or Antinomianism as a Norm*, Unpublished PhD Thesis, Wolfson College, Oxford, 2002.

³⁵ R.S. Sharma, *Early Medieval Indian Society: A Study in Feudalisation*, New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2001, p. 232.

(8th century CE) and the *Hevajratantra* (8th/9th century CE) witnessed further complex practice of mandala and ascetic practice as well as the rise of protective fierce deities like Yamāntaka, Hevajra and Saṃvara. The latter texts like the *Sādhanamālā* (10th century), the *Niṣpannayogāvalī* (11th century) and the *Caryāpada* (12th century) were characterized by the psychic worship methods, and an aversion for the traditional Buddhist theology.

The present study finds that the texts under survey represent diverse and distinctive traditions of psychic and ritual practices prevalent in Buddhism. Evidently, they were representative of a composite culture that incorporated an array of complex ritual practices. This has also created a potential ambiguity posing a challenge on the way of defining Tantric Buddhism and its idealistic tenets prevalent in our context more comprehensively. The deliberate obscurity in the language of texts, use of symbols, semiology, and metaphors, and the limited evidence for locating the targeted audience further aggravate the problem of defining the social scope of the practice of Buddhist tantra in our given context. The use of more intensely hybridized Sanskrit in the regional texts and indeed the genesis of the proto vernacular has also provoked scholars to argue that these texts were probably composed outside the boundary of the high monastic culture.³⁶ The adoption of the vernacular language in anthologies like *Caryāpada* may lead us to infer that the abstract idealism of Sahaja and Śūnya had developed in a condition of deep-rooted reciprocation with the vernacular culture.

The two kalpa texts, i.e. *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa* and *Tārāmūlakalpa* also signified the important transition from Mahāyāna to Vajrayāna Buddhism by their projection of mantra method or Mantrayāna. The *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa* and *Tārāmūlakalpa* contain a host of this type of mantra practices to achieve the goal of salvation, which was understood in the conceptual light of tantra. These goals were not only related to the attaining of Buddhahood or Nirvāṇa (*lokottara*) but also to get rid of several mundane problems like epidemics, snakebites, wrath of the demonic forces etc. This phenomenon indicates that the tantric ritual landscape was not only meant for the adherents of hardcore asceticism within the order but also designed to address the daily need of the laity. Buddhist ritual horizon in the early medieval Bengal was therefore expanding its boundary by recognizing the mundane problems and providing a solution to them. Despite, accommodating these needs, the Buddhist mantra, dhāraṇī and

³⁶ David Gray, “The Cakrasamvara Tantra: Its History and Interpretation”, in *Religion Compass*, 1/6, 2007, p.700.

maṇḍala rituals, meant for the attainment of perfect knowledge (samyaksambodhi), enjoyed a higher position in the sacred world.

The anthologies on the other hand, were indicative of compilation and standardization of scattered sādhanā and caryā into the single texts. The Buddhist anthologies like *Sādhanamālā* and *Caryāpada* were the products of their own time when anthological tradition including the *Saduktikarṇāmṛta* and the *Subhāṣitaratnaḥṣa* was becoming a literary trend in early medieval Bengal.³⁷ The *sādhanās* and *caryās*, both very distinct from each other in philosophy and spiritual tone, were attributed to several authors (mostly, siddhācārya) who were either associated with the contemporary Buddhist vihāra as teachers or professors or hailing from obscure roots. The diverse psychic practices of visualizing a Buddhist deity, described in the *Sādhanamālā*, inextricably connected the Buddhist deities of early medieval Bengal with the tantric method of invocation. The Bodhisattva figures like Avalokiteśvara, Mañjuśrī, Tārā, Amitābha so far venerated as important Mahāyāna deities were invested with the tantric connotations and characteristics and were perceived from the tantra perspective within the obscure ritual world of the Buddhist ascetics or sādhanika. These deities were also assigned female or male consorts, conforming to the ideology of realizing the non-dual nature of śūnya through sexual means. The tantric Buddhist idea of Mahāsukhavāda or the idea of supreme bliss as a vehicle to reach the highest truth was vividly reflected in the invocation methods prescribed in the *Sādhanamālā*. Thus, the tradition of consortium of male and female deities marked a paradigm shift, which first appeared in the *Guhyasamāja Tantra* (6th century CE) and got further crystalized in the depiction of the Buddhist pantheon in the *Sādhanamālā*.

The appearance of late vernacular Buddhist texts indicate that the later tantric Buddhist ideas were gradually gaining a foothold in the vernacular medium, beyond the Sanskritic culture. The further hybridization of the medium of Sanskrit in the early medieval Buddhist texts and the ultimate adoption of possibly what was the spoken vernacular in the region may signify the influence of vernacular elements in the literary horizon of tantric Buddhist since 9th century CE. The aversion noted in the *Caryāpada* to the recondite scholarship of the Buddhist vihāra strongly indicates the alternative idealistic parameter nurtured by the Buddhist siddhācāryas. Many of the Buddhist siddhācāryas, including Tilopā, Naropā, Tantipā, Kukkuripā were indigenous to the region of Bengal as attested by the hagiographic text called

³⁷ Ludwik Sternbach, *Subhāṣita, Gnostic and Didactic Literature, A History of Indian Literature*, Vol. 4, New Delhi: Manohar, p. 23.

Caturāśītīsiddhapravṛtti of Abhayadattaśrī.³⁸ Despite the challenge they posed to the established monastic practices, their philosophy of prioritizing the sahaja or innate human nature stemmed from complex soteriological notions and represented much deeper discursive space than the ornate ritualistic world of the Sādhana.³⁹ The composition of the Caryā songs in the vernacular language probably indicates that the vernacular community constituted the milieu of the itinerant Buddhist ascetics. The use of double entendre (sāndhya language) by deliberately obfuscating the language signified that it was to be strictly followed and practiced by the ordained pupils who had been initiated to the tradition by a preceptor or guru. The path was thus not open to all and sundry. The complex idea and practice of realizing the highest truth by embracing the innate instinct of the body (kāyāsādhana) led to the final manifestation of the distinct strand of tantric Buddhism into Sahajayāna in the late 11th century CE. We must also note that while the vihāras housed ritual practices spelled out in the sādhanā, there was little to connect them to the Sahaja practices. This may be due to the fact that the vernacular Buddhist literature talked about a culture of tantra which largely prevailed in the sphere beyond the monastic institutions.

The tantric Buddhist literature therefore records the varied ritual and cultural complexes embodying ideas and practices which we have seen in a more focused manner within our given context. The contemporary yet different and sometimes contradictory sets of tantric practices propagated in the two anthologies bear out the dual characteristics of tantric Buddhism in early medieval Bengal. Buddhist tantra in this context was therefore multifaceted and often contradictory in terms of the core rituals, ideas, and practices, much like an umbrella term which encompassed several psychological, physical, and ritual practices. We can categorize the different forms of Buddhist tantra in our context with reference to our textual evidence. For example, the first category was comprised of the tantra texts within the Mahāyāna tradition like the *Prajñāpāramitā* and the *Pañcarakṣā* texts. The next category included the intermediary *Guhyasamājatantra* and the kalpa literature like the *Mañjuśrīmūlakapa* and the *Tārāmūlakalpa* which initiated a turn towards tantrism. Lastly, we have anthological texts like the *Sāadhanamālā* and the *Caryāpada* and Yoginītantra texts like the *Cakrasaṃvaratantra* and the *Hevajratantra* which witnessed the full-fledged development of tantric Buddhism.

³⁸ For the siddha tradition of Tilo pā see, Fabrizio Toricelli, *Tilopā: A Buddhist Yogī of the Tenth Century*, Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, (undated). For the tradition of Naro pā see, Herbert Guenther, *The Life and Teaching of Naropā*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1974.

³⁹ Ronald M Davidson, "Reframing Sahaja: Genre, Representation, Ritual and Lineage," in *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, 2002, 30: 46.

The most obvious visible pieces of evidence for tantric Buddhism in early medieval Bengal are available in the form of sculptures and paintings. We have discussed the major aspects of the findings in the fourth chapter. Our survey reveals that the sculptural corpus contained mostly the Bodhisattva figures like Avalokiteśvara, Mañjuśrī, Tārā, Akṣobhya, Maitreya etc., which were traditionally related to Mahāyāna Buddhism. However, certain new features appeared in their iconography from 8th century CE onwards, which signified the rise of tantric ideas and ritualistic norms. For example, the figures of Siṃhanāda Avalokiteśvara and Mañjuvara (a form of Mañjuśrī) were depicted as riding on the roaring lion. Violent iconographical features began to modify the compassionate Bodhisattva figures. The iconography of Bhṛkūṭī Tārā and Vajra Tārā also embraced horrific expressions holding weapons. We also come across the figures of Mañjuvakra, a special form of Mañjuśrī, holding vajra and bell – the two essential ritual elements of tantric Buddhism. Thus, the Bodhisattva figures were gradually deviating from their orthodox compassionate character and assuming the fierce and violent form which was very much related to the exhibition of tantric power. Their sādhanā method described in the *Sāadhanamālā* also involved a host of complex tantric ritual and practice. The vajra motif, one of the key conceptual elements of Vajrayāna Buddhism, appeared in the iconographies of several Bodhisattva and protective figures. The Buddhist images of early medieval Bengal thus showed curious imprints of a new kind of Buddhism, distinguished from their erstwhile Mahāyāna depiction.

The Buddhist sculptural corpus also comprised of a number of laukika and dhāraṇī deities like Parṇaśabarī, Jāngulī, and Cundā. Their mundane purpose of invocation indicates to the daily or mundane utility of the Buddhist tantra. Parṇaśabarī, wearing a leaf-weaved cloth and with a protruding belly, bulging eyes, and dwarf figure, was invoked for removing epidemics. She was probably originally worshipped by the forest dweller śabara community and later was absorbed into the Buddhist pantheon. Similarly, the cult of Jāngulī was primarily centered around the protection of the people from snakebites.⁴⁰ The tradition of the deities invoked for safety in the forest land, especially from the snakebites goes back to the Pali suttas. The Bajaur manuscripts (1st century BCE) discovered from the Gāndhāra region, too contained some of the early rakṣā literature which prescribed the mantra practice for safety in the forest

⁴⁰ Nupur Dasgupta, “Faith, Healing and Serpent Goddesses: Exploring the Threshold between the Ritual and the Medical in the cults of Jāngulī-Manasā,” in *Journal of Bengal Art*, Vo. 21, 2016, pp. 25-36.

land.⁴¹ The worship of Cundā, the deified figure of Cunda dhāraṇī, became popular among the seafaring monks traveling from South Asian ports to Southeast Asia. Cundā was worshipped for protection from various dangers in the water. Several other protective deities became dominant in the Buddhist sculptural landscape of early medieval Bengal. We may mention Yamāri, Yamāntaka, Mahākāla, Mārīcī, Sitāpatrā and Mahāpratisarā, mainly found in the Samataṭa and Puṇḍravardhana sub-regions. These deities were mainly invoked by the monastic community for the protection of the monastery from outside attack. The cult of Yamāntaka and Mahākāla later was adopted by the royal courts of the Dali Kingdom, and Xi Xia.⁴² The worship of protective demonic figures reflects the anxiety of the Buddhist monastic community from the constant warring condition of early medieval period and invasion by foreigners.

The deep aspiration for refuge from danger/enemy can be inferred from the continuous production of the Pañcarakṣā manuscripts in the mahavihāras of Nālandā, Vikramśīla and Jagaddala. The Pañcarakṣā manuscripts and the paintings of rakṣā deities like Mahāpratisarā and Mahāmāyūrī probably emanated from the need to secure the monastic institution from the imminent danger. Simultaneously, the Prajñāpāramitā text also appeared in large number in the corpus of Buddhist manuscripts in early medieval Bengal, signifying the Buddhist cult of Book worship. The Prajñāpāramitā tradition may be traced back in the Gāndhāra region circa 1st century BCE in light of the recent discovery of the Gandhāri manuscripts.⁴³ It became a dominant Mahāyāna tradition with magical and mystical potential in India and China. It is however difficult to map the route of transmission of Prajñāpāramitā cult in the early medieval eastern India. The text was deified later as the iconographical details of the Goddess Prajñāpāramitā was listed in *Sādhanamālā* and the sculptural counterpart of the same has been found in Malda, West Bengal. The spiritual idea embodied in the text itself became a sacred object as book worship gained coinage in early medieval Buddhism. The manuscript itself became a ritual object and the tradition survived in the Vajrayāna Buddhism practiced in Tibet and Himalayan belt.

⁴¹ Ingo Strauch, “The evolution of the Buddhist *rakṣā* genre in the Light of New Evidence from Gandhara: The *Manasvi-nāgarāja-sūtra* from the Bajaur collection of Kharoṣṭhī Manuscripts,” in *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London*, Vol. 77, No. 1, p. 67.

⁴² Claudine Bautze-Picron, “Images of Devotion and Power in South and Southeast Bengal,” in Andrea Acri (ed), *Esoteric Buddhism in Medieval Maritime Asia*, Singapore: ISEAS Press, 2016, p. 164.

⁴³ Stefan Baums, “Truth and Scripture in Early Buddhism: Categorical Reduction as Exegetical Method in Ancient Gandhāra and Beyond,” in Tansen Sen (ed), *Buddhism Across Asia: Networks of Material, Intellectual and Cultural Exchange*, Vol. I, Singapore: ISEAS, 2014, pp. 19-40.

The root of tantric Buddhist rituals was embedded in the mantra, mudra, *dhāraṇī* and maṇḍala which sporadically appeared at a much earlier phase in the early Mahāyāna sutra. These ritual paraphernalia were gradually assuming central position in the sacred rituals of tantric Buddhism. We noted that the inter-regional connectivity of Bengal with Northwestern part of the subcontinent via Himalayan corridor as well as different regions of Southeast and Central Asia in the 6th century CE coincided with the preponderance of maṇḍala, mantra and dhāraṇī in the Buddhist texts and material culture. The Buddhist monastic institutions of early medieval Bengal like Nālandā, Vikramśīla, Somapura and Odantapura became important nodal centers of an extensive esoteric Buddhist network across the Bay of Bengal.⁴⁴ These Buddhist mahāvihāras facilitated the exchange and interaction of variety of ideas and rituals with Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia, Java, Sumatra, Tibet and Yunnan. Movement of Buddhist pilgrims, masters and itinerant monks through this network resulted in the creation of a huge sacred space of Buddhism to which eastern India was an integral part. The extension of a southern route of Silk Road from Yunnan to Bengal via Myanmar in 6th century CE and Bengal's interaction with Tibet and Nepal contributed to the rise of different complex ritual practices in Buddhism.

Coming to the end of our study, we must address the theory that holds the rise of tantra responsible for the ultimate decline of Buddhism in eastern India. The processes of deviation from the orthodox Buddhist notion, making room for the bizarre practices like consumption of flesh and blood, sacrifice of animals, the sexual yogic practices are believed to have weakened the strict monastic discipline leading to a decline in morale. However, it is difficult to pinpoint the causative factors for the decline of this old and venerated tradition and to trace the extent to which the emergence of tantra really weakened the organizational base of Buddhism. The percolation of the Buddhist Sahajayāna siddha and Nātha siddha traditions like that of Matsyendranātha in the vernacular space might actually have strengthened the mass hold of Buddhism in later days. The nationalist historians also denounced the Islamic invasion, especially the ransack of the Buddhist monasteries by Bakhtiyar Khilji during the establishment of sultanate in Bengal as the principal reason of the decline of Buddhism in Bengal. Devastating effect of Bakhtiyar Khilji's invasion on the early medieval Buddhist monasteries like Nālandā, Vikramśīla and Odantapura is primarily known from the Minhaj-us-Siraj's *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri*.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Andrea Acri (ed), *Esoteric Buddhism in Medieval Maritime Asia: Networks of Masters, Texts, Icons*, Singapore: ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute, 2016.

⁴⁵ H.G. Raverty (tr.), *Tabakāt- i- Nāsiri: A General History of the Muḥammadan Dynasties of Asia, including Hindūstān by the Maulānā, Minhāj – ud – din Abū '-Umar -I – uṣmān*, London: Osnabrück: Biblio Verlag, 1991, p.552.

However, D.N. Jha has raised objection regarding the accountability of Siraj's record as this was not his first-hand account. He recorded the incident forty years after the actual 'invasion' from a soldier-brother duo who fought for Khilji.⁴⁶ Siraj referred to the fort-city of Audand-Vihāra which has been identified with the Odantapura Mahavihāra of Bihar Sharif. As Nālandā was not situated on the common route from Delhi to Bengal, the mahavihāra was probably not invaded by Bakhtiyar Khilji. A narrative about the incident of demolition of eighty-four viharikās of Nālandā by the Turuskas⁴⁷ or Turkish invaders was also mentioned by Dharmasvāmīn, a Tibetan scholar who visited Nālandā in 1235 CE. This narrative too was based on the secondary sources, datable to a much later period than the actual time of decline. The invasion of Bakhtiyar Khalji as the principal cause of decline has been challenged by many historians who argued that Buddhism was already under severe challenge before the Islamic invasion. It was under systematic attack by the Brahmanical authorities, patronized by the regional polities.⁴⁸ Deep hostility for Buddhism can be noticed since earlier times. The accounts of Xuanzang (7th century CE) and Lama Tāranātha (17th century) stated that both Śaivism and Vaiṣṇavism had created a hostile ambience for Buddhism in different religious centers of early medieval Bengal. Xuanzang narrated the incident of cutting down of the Bodhi tree and replacement of Buddha figure with a figure of Maheśvara by the king of Gauḍa - Śaśāṅka in early 7th century CE.⁴⁹ Tāranātha mentioned that a *tirthika*, heretics to the Buddhist order, destroyed eighty-four temples at Nālandā in the 12th century.⁵⁰ G. Omvedt pointed out that the aggressive statal political force in early medieval India steadily sponsored the Brahmanical institutions which continuously repressed the Buddhist institutions.⁵¹

K.T.S. Sarao has proposed several causative factors for the decline of Buddhism in the Indian sub-continent. These included the urban orientation and lack of mass base as well as its over dependence on the mercantile community for material support. Other allied factors identified by him comprised, the factor of social aloofness of the monastic order and the

⁴⁶ Chitrallekha Hajra, *Social and Cultural Life in Religious Complexes in Bengal and Bihar: 600 CE – 1300 CE*, Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Calcutta, p. 93.

⁴⁷ George Roerich, *Biography of Dharmasvāmīn (Chag Lo Tsa-Ba Chos -Rje-Dpal): A Tibetan Monk Pilgrim*, Patna: K.P. Jayaswal Research Institute, 1959, p. xix.

⁴⁸ Kunal Chakrabarti, "A History of Intolerance: The Representation of Buddhists in the Bengal Puranas," in *Social Scientist*, Vol. 44, No. 5/6, pp. 11-27.

⁴⁹ S. Beal (tr), *Si-Yu-Ki: Buddhist Record of the Western World*, Delhi: Oriental Books Reprint Corporation, 1969, pp. 346-349.

⁵⁰ Lama Chimpa and Aloka Chattopadhyaya (tr), *Tāranātha's History of Buddhism in India*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1970, Chapter 16, 19, 20.

⁵¹ Gail Omvedt, *Buddhism in India: Challenging Brahmanism and Caste*, London, 2003, p. 142.

prevalence of Brahmanical elements in the saṃgha.⁵² In the specific context of the decline of Buddhism in Bengal, Sarao has noted that in the process of ‘detrabalizing the indigenous population’ Buddhism was competing with Brahmanism.⁵³ In the fringe region of eastern India, the process of shifting belief and social allegiances led to the usurpation of the position of Buddhist by Purāṇa-based Brahmanical-Hinduism. Abhisek S. Amar has recently pointed out that beyond the paradigm of contestation and syncretism, Buddhism and Brahmanism shared a complex relationship, characterized by interactions.⁵⁴ The Buddhist institution was not a passive institution in the face of rising challenge in early medieval South Asia. Neither was it a stagnant and dwindling religious order in the 7th century CE as described by Xuanzang, as the abundance of archaeological evidence till 12th century speak otherwise. The decline therefore, cannot be solely attributed to either Brahmanical aggression during the 7th century or the Islamic invasion later on, or even to the conspicuous rise of Tantra from the 9th century onwards. A combination of factors responsible for the weakening social base of Buddhism.

The supposed ‘decline’ of Buddhism in Bengal did not however wipe out the trace of Buddhist spiritual culture completely. A lot of the Buddhist deities, especially the mother goddesses were absorbed into the Śākta and Śaiva traditions which gained a tremendous momentum throughout the medieval period. Mahācina-Tārā, for example, ended up being incorporated into the Śākta pantheon with the name Tārā.⁵⁵ She is also regarded as one of the ten *mahāvīdyās*. The Śaiva and Śākta tantric texts like *Tārārahasya*, *Rudrayāmala*, *Mahācinācārakrama* prescribed the *Vāmācāra* practice for the worship of Tārā which is very much similar to the *sādhanā* of Ugratārā and Ekajaṭā may be found in the *Sādhanamālā*. The cult of Tārā was not only assimilated in the medieval Śākta tradition of Bengal but also came to be absorbed into the Chinese mother goddess Si-wang-mu and the cult of Ekajaṭā in Bhota or Tibet. The deities found in the Śākta Sāṭcakra like dākīnī, Hākīnī, Lākīnī, Sākīnī etc. owed their origin to Buddhist Tantra.⁵⁶ Resemblance may also be found between Buddhist Naiṛātma and Śākta Kālī and Buddhist Jāngulī and Brahmanical Manasā and Viṣaharī. Simultaneously, the Dharma cult of medieval Bengal, especially as described in the *Dharmamaṅgala Kāvya*,

⁵² K.T.S. Sarao, *The Decline of Buddhism in India: A Fresh Perspective*, Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 2012, p. 263.

⁵³ *Ibid*, p. 230.

⁵⁴ Abhisek S. Amar, “Buddhist Responses to Brahmana Challenges in Medieval India: Bodhgayā and Gayā”, in *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Vol. 22, No. 1, pp. 157-58.

⁵⁵ N.N. Bhattacharyya, *History of the Śākta Religion*, New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Private Limited, 1973, p. 95.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, p. 96.

also owed its origin to the later Buddhism. S.B. Dasgupta has noted that the liturgical texts of Mantrayāna and Vajrayāna like the *Kriyāsaṃgraha* shared striking similarities with the vernacular texts like *Śūnya-purāṇa* and *Dharma-pūjā Vidhāna*.⁵⁷ The constituent elements of the later Buddhist vernacular texts therefore help us in tracking the final trajectory of modifications and absorption of tantric Buddhist tradition in Bengal. The assimilation and survival of the Buddhist tantra element in the medieval vernacular cults are very much visible.

The esoteric Buddhist songs of the *Caryāpada* and their underlying concepts later influenced various heterodox religious sects in Bengal. Known as the Sahajiyā tradition, these ideas became widespread among later bauls, dervishes, fakirs, auls, saints, and other itinerant heterodox spiritual orders.⁵⁸ Some scholars argue that the rise of Vaiṣṇava Bhakti in Bengal led by Śrī Chaitanya in the 16th century was closely linked with the ancient esoteric rituals and teachings of the Sahajiyā Buddhists. The *Caitanya Caritāmṛta*, a classic Vaiṣṇava text, provides a unique and highly unconventional interpretation, revising the secretive and transgressive practices of the Sahajiyās.⁵⁹ Conversely, some scholars disagree, suggesting that the Bhakti tradition represented a clear departure from the secretive, ritualistic Tantric practices.⁶⁰ These processes of transmission and transition are indeed complex and challenging to define. Nonetheless, it is tempting to align with Hugh Urban's view which traces the evolution of esoteric traditions into the Vaiṣṇava Bhakti movement and even Islamic mysticism within different Sufi orders of Bengal. The Tantric tradition may have influenced Sufi mysticism in its turn, which mirrored the Master-Disciple relationship seen in *pir* and *murid* tradition, along with a detailed system of bodily cosmography and meditative practices.⁶¹ Like the Sahajiyās, Sufis also developed esoteric hermeneutics for interpreting the Korān. The cross-cultural interactions between Sahajiyās, Vaiṣṇavas, and Sufis led to the emergence of wandering holy figures such as *bauls*, *auls*, and *kartabhajas*. The basic liberal and idealistic stance of the *bauls*, known for flouting moral and religious norms, appears to have had deep roots in the esoteric Tantric rituals.

⁵⁷ Shashi Bhusan Dasgupta, *Obscure Religious Cult: As Background of Bengali Literature*, Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1946 p. 299

⁵⁸ Hugu B. Urban, *Economics of Ecstasy: Tantra, Secrecy, and Power in Colonial Bengal*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 35.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

⁶⁰ Patton E. Burchett, *The Genealogy of Devotion, Bhakti, Tantra, Yoga and Sufism in North India*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2019, p. 3.

⁶¹ Urban, *Economics of Ecstasy*, p. 36.

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