

## **Synopsis of Pre-submission**

# **The Tantric Turn in Buddhism: Exploring its Origin and Development in Early Medieval Bengal (6<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> centuries CE)**

The present research aims to understand the conspicuous processes and features of certain aspects of Buddhism, often termed tantric, in the early medieval Bengal (6<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> centuries CE). The study focuses on the region of greater Bengal which was arguably the last stronghold of Buddhism in the Indian sub-continent before its disappearance. The region lay in the Lower Ganga Valley, starting from slightly west of the Rajmahal Hills, and consisted of the new alluvial plain of the Ganga-Brahmaputra-Meghna system and the old alluvial plains of Barind, Madhupur, and Lalmai Hills. Buddhism in early medieval Bengal, particularly from the 7<sup>th</sup> century onwards, experienced certain transformations that were hitherto absent in the religious landscape of the region. The transformation, characterized by the rise of an esoteric mystical ritual and practice, was a curious feature of not only Buddhism but also several other Brahmanical religious orders in Bengal like Saivism, Saktism, and Vaishnavism. The existence of tantric Buddhism in Bengal has been often uncritically accepted without analyzing and historicizing its tangible evidence. This research proposes to address the problem by exploring the varied representations of tantric Buddhism in the Buddhist texts, images, paintings, and viharas of early medieval Bengal.

### **Objective of Research**

The present research seeks to comprehensively define the characteristic trends of tantric Buddhism in early medieval Bengal. The principal focus will be on tracing the origin and development of tantric Buddhism and understanding its various manifestations in the specific regional context of Bengal from the 6<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> centuries CE. We shall enquire about the way certain esoteric cults became apparent in Buddhism as it was gradually intermingling with the erstwhile Mahayana ideas. The presence of deep-rooted indigenous ritual culture continuously shaped and assimilated into the major religious orders of early medieval Bengal. We will also enquire into whether the development of tantric Buddhism was a result of Bengal's geographical location in a cultural crossroads that created a ground for its intercultural interaction with Southeast Asia, Tibet, and sub-Himalayan regions. For this purpose, we would look into the material and extra-material culture of the Buddhist viharas which were the principal centers of academic learning and religious preaching. We shall also investigate a few

Buddhist texts of early medieval Bengal like *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa*, *Tārāmūlakalpa*, *Sādhanamālā*, *Niṣpannayogāvalī*, and *Caryāpada*. Simultaneously, we shall also review the images of Buddhist deities and painted manuscripts.

### **Review of the Secondary Literature**

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 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 overall 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. While editing several tantric Buddhist texts Bhattacharyya gathered extensive knowledge about Tantric culture reflected in them. According to him the earliest trace of Tantra can be found in the time of Buddha who recognized *riiddhi* or supernatural power and mentioned four *iddhipadas*<sup>1</sup> conducive to the attainment of supernatural power. 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.<sup>2</sup> He has mainly conducted textual studies and sought to find whether the rise of Tantra can be attributed to the loosely defined Mahāyānic practice of the 8<sup>th</sup> century or in other minor forms. He has discussed extensively several schools of Tantric Buddhism like Kālacakrayāna, Sahajayāna, Nathism, etc., and then like Bhattacharya drew the philosophical roots of Tantra from the later Mahāyāna schools like Madhyamaka and Yogācāravāda.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The four *iddhipadas* -*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 *Ramakrishna Mission Studies on Tantra*

<sup>2</sup> Shashibhusan Dasgupta, *Obscure Religious Cult; As Backgrounds of Bengali Literature*, Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1946

<sup>3</sup> Shashibhusan Dasgupta, *An Introduction to Tantric Buddhism*, Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1950, p. 98-105

The quest to find the origin of Tantra was then carried on by Chintaharan Chakravarti.<sup>4</sup> Chakravarti argues that Tantra originated among the low-class non-Aryan people and was gradually appropriated by the Buddhists and the Hindus.<sup>5</sup> He even suggested that Tantrism was present in the Atharva Veda, Dharmasāstra, Purānas, and Buddhist and Jain literature.<sup>6</sup> 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 antecedents of Tantras and the Suramgama-Sutra mentioned by Fa-Hien contained the most complete list of Dhāraṇīs.<sup>7</sup> P.C. Bagchi argues that “Tantras emerged out of the Vedic religion and were then developed as a distinct type of esoteric knowledge.”<sup>8</sup> He placed the origin of Buddhist Tantra in the 7<sup>th</sup> century and traced the philosophical roots of Tantra in the Madhyamaka and Yogācāra schools of Buddhism.<sup>9</sup> The earlier scholars in this field like Bhattacharyya, Dasgupta, Chakravarti, and Bagchi were overwhelmingly engaged with the theoretical practice and evolution of Tantra and its different ritualistic characteristics. Little attention has been devoted to its social implication and the factors including social and political that have prepared the ground of Tantrism in Bengal.

More recently, Christian k. Wedemeyer and Geoffrey Samuels have made different approaches in the understanding of this obscure cult. Wedemeyer offers a fresh method to understand the phenomenon by using semiology as a methodological instrument. The antinomian and antisocial behaviours found in the tantric literature should not be taken by its literal meaning.<sup>10</sup> He observed that the physical sacraments like eating flesh etc. can be replaced by visualized sacraments in the tantric meditative practice. The transgressive behaviour, he argues, was promoted to reject the normative behaviour of traditional religion.<sup>11</sup> Geoffrey Samuels’s study focuses on the origin of Śaiva, Vaisnabha, and Buddhist Tantra in general. He argues that the Buddhist Maṇḍala model was progressively adapted by the incorporation of the wild goddesses.<sup>12</sup> They were initially offered a place at the edges of the

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<sup>4</sup> Chintaharan Chakravarti, *The Tantras; Studies on Their Religion and Literature*, Calcutta 1963

<sup>5</sup> Chintaharan Chakravarti, *Ibid*, p. 45

<sup>6</sup> Chintaharan Chakravarti, *Ibid*, p. 10-17

<sup>7</sup> 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

<sup>8</sup> Prabodh Chandra Bagchi, ‘Evolution of the Tantras’, in *Ramakrishna Mission Studies on the Tantras*, Calcutta, 1989, p. 9

<sup>9</sup> Bagchi, *Ibid*, p. 16

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, 125.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, p. 177.

<sup>12</sup> Geoffrey Samuel, *The Origin of Yoga and Tantra; Indic Religion to the Thirteenth Century*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008, p. 262

Maṇḍala as guardians and protectors but later they were assumed as major figures as can be seen in the Hevajra Maṇḍala.

The significant study in Indian esoteric Buddhism by Ronald M. Davidson argued that the Buddhist esoterism of the 7<sup>th</sup> century was a result of the “internalization and sacralization” of the early medieval political power matrix.<sup>13</sup> 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 the 7<sup>th</sup> century. It only became apparent and crystalized in the context of an early medieval complex matrix of political, social, and economic factors.

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 based on specific socio-cultural features.

*(b) The studies in the context of Bengal's tantrism*

R.S. Sharma has discussed tantra as a characteristic of early medieval society. He argues that the setting up of Buddhist monasteries in new areas of Bengal and Deccan has brought it in close connection with the aboriginals of the concerned area.<sup>14</sup> The aboriginals were assimilated into the Buddhist social order by the acculturation of their non-Buddhist deities and rituals and thus tantra became visible in contemporary 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 Madhyadesa.<sup>15</sup> 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 argues that as far as appropriation and integration of cult is concerned this does not imply a ‘harmonious syncretism’ but it does imply a formation of structure which “combines a heterogeneous belief into a whole even while making (or transforming) specific elements dominant.”<sup>16</sup> Though Chattopadhyaya has not looked at the phenomenon from the special context of Bengal.

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<sup>13</sup> Ronald M. Davidson, *Indian Esoteric Buddhism: A Social History of Tantric Movement*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2002, pp. 160-65.

<sup>14</sup> R.S. Sharma, *Early Medieval Indian Society: A Study in Feudalisation*, New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2001, p. 245.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, p. 246.

<sup>16</sup> B.D. Chattopadhyaya, *The Making of Early Medieval India* [1994], New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012, p. 31.

Niharranjan Roy also argues with the same tone that the lower strata of both Brahmanism and Buddhism were populated by the Aborigines who had kin-based/tribal societies. The mainstream religious orders like Brahmanism and Buddhism adopted some of their beliefs and customs after filtering them according to their necessity.<sup>17</sup> B.N.S. Yadava also argues that the feudal character of early medieval India facilitated the spread of Tantrism while Tantric Buddhism, Tantric Saivism, and Tantric Saktism had made the position of *varṇāśhrmadharma* critical in Bengal and adjoining regions.<sup>18</sup> Taking the cue from the non-conformist siddhacharyas of the Sahajayana Buddhism, N.N. Bhattacharya has also advocated for an aboriginal origin of tantra and argued that Tantric Buddhism was a religion of mass, deriving its constituent elements from the Lokayata tradition.<sup>19</sup>

Studies by Sharma, Ray, Yadava, and N.N. Bhattacharya are silent about the different reciprocal dynamics of the cultural interaction between Buddhism and the aboriginal cult. They located tantra as a by-product of the early medieval socio-political transformation. Tantra or tantric Buddhism as a dynamic religious process has not been sufficiently explored.

Writers of the general religious history of Buddhism in Bengal like Puspa Niyogi,<sup>20</sup> Gayatri Sen Majumdar,<sup>21</sup> and Rama Chatterjee<sup>22</sup> 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. Though they have described Buddhism of the concerned period as Tantric and pointed out some general characteristics of magic and mysticism, they did not analyze 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.

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

Extensive survey work on the Buddhist monuments of India was done by Debala Mitra. Her work covered a wide range of Buddhist stupas, shrines, and viharas all over India since

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<sup>17</sup> Niharranjan Ray, *Bangaleer Itihas Aadi Parba* (in Bengali) [1949], Kolkata: Dey's Publishing, 2013, p. 529.

<sup>18</sup> B.N.S. Yadava, *Society and Culture in Northern India: In the Twelfth Century*, Allahabad: Central Book Depot, 1973, p. 380.

<sup>19</sup> N.N. Bhattacharyya, *History of the Tantric Religion: An Historical, Ritualistic and Philosophical Studies* [1982], New Delhi: Manohar, 2005, p. 262-265.

<sup>20</sup> Puspa Niyogi, *Buddhism in Ancient Bengal*, Kolkata: Jijnasa, 1980.

<sup>21</sup> Gayatri Sen Majumder, *Buddhism in Ancient Bengal*, Kolkata: Navana, 1983.

<sup>22</sup> Rama Chatterjee, *Religion in Bengal during the Pala and Sena Times*, Kolkata: Punthi Pustak, p. 1985.

ancient times. Mitra noted, in terms of a few antiquities like the Hevajra-Sakti image of Paharpur<sup>23</sup> and *dhāraṇī* tablets of Mainamati<sup>24</sup>, that there was a presence of tantric Buddhism in these sites.

By studying the dedicatory inscriptions of the Buddhist sites like Kurkihar, Vikramsila, and Bodhi Gaya, B.N. Prasad has argued that the monks as well as the lay followers belonged to the Mahayana creed. For example, the title *paramopāsaka* and *paramopāsikā* signified a layman and a woman respectively who were Mahayana worshippers, while *śākyabhikṣu* and *śākyabhikṣuni* signified a monk and nun affiliated to Mahayana Buddhism.<sup>25</sup> However, the sites also produced images of Siddhāikavira, Vagiśvara, Parnaśabari, Vasudharā, and Hariti, meant to fulfill the mundane (*laukika*) need. These *laukika* deities were incorporated into the orbit of Vajrayana/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.

*Caryā* or Yoga Tantra-based landscape of Buddhist *vihāras* is noticed in Udaygiri, Ratnagiri, and Lalitgiri of early medieval Orissa by Umakant Mishra.<sup>26</sup> By suggesting that these were *maṇḍalavihāra*, he argued that the insertion of *dharma cetiya* such as *pratitya-samutpadadhāraṇī* and *vimalosinisadhāraṇī* is the typical feature of this tantric landscape. From the 7th century onwards, these *dhāraṇīs* substituted the body relic and became the symbol of Tathagata centering on which a stupa can be made.<sup>27</sup> In the 8th century, the construction of a stupa in the Udaygiri area was modeled on *garbhadhātumaṇḍala* of *mahāvairocana sutra*. 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 viharas of Bengal as the central shrine of the Paharpur monastery also has been identified as symbolically representing *garvadhātumaṇḍala*.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Debala Mitra, *Buddhist Monuments*, Calcutta: Sahitya Samsad, 1971, p. 240

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 246.

<sup>25</sup> Birendra Nath Prasad, *Rethinking Bihar, and Bengal: History, Culture and Religion*, New Delhi: Manohar, 2022 (Reprint), p. 98.

<sup>26</sup> 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.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 245.

<sup>28</sup> Swadhin Sen, 'Paharpur', in Abdul Momin Chowdhuri and Ranabir Chakravarti, *History of Bangladesh*, Vol. I, Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 2019, p. 359.

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

The study of Tantric Buddhist images has been overwhelmingly occupied by the quest to learn the iconographic details and to understand the artistic pattern. The first such endeavor came from the first curator of the Indian Museum John Anderson<sup>29</sup> and then from Theodor Bloch.<sup>30</sup> Both of them presented a rough account of the Buddhist images of the Indian Museum, hardly discussing the sculptures historically. In 1919 Radha Govinda Basak and Dinesh Chandra Bhattacharya published a book covering the images of the Varendra Research Society.<sup>31</sup> 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.<sup>32</sup> Bhattasali for the first time made an effort to accord the images with the iconography prescribed in *Sādhnamālā* (for this task he depended on the work of Foucher) and also provided a short introduction to the role of gods and goddesses in the Buddhist pantheon before discussing the sculptures.<sup>33</sup>

Stella Kramrisch<sup>34</sup> added a significant contribution to the field by exploring Pāla and Sena sculpture but did not establish a chronological basis upon which the Pāla and Sena period can be dated. Rakhal Das Banerjee<sup>35</sup> also devoted a detailed study in the field during the 1930s. But like Bhattasali, Banerjee too depended on the paleographic sources for the dating of the images. S.K. Saraswati undertook a venture to throw light on Tantrayana art by describing the stylistic differences between the iconography of various images.<sup>36</sup> Recently, Claudine Bautze-Picron and GJR Mevissen have endeavored to conduct a microanalysis of the massive corpus of Buddhist images in terms of their regional specificities, production, and transportation. Bautze-Picron has argued that the center of the mass production of Buddhist stone sculpture was based in Kurkihar, while the production of the metal sculpture was based in the Mainamati

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<sup>29</sup> John Anderson, *Catalogue and Handbook of Archaeological Collection of the Indian Museum*, 2 vols. Calcutta: Trustees of the Indian Museum, 1882-83.

<sup>30</sup> Theodor Bloch, *Supplementary Catalogue of the Archaeological Collections of the Indian Museum* Calcutta: Baptist Mission Press, 1911.

<sup>31</sup> R.G. Basak and Dinesh Chandra Bhattacharya, *A Catalogue of the Archaeological Relics in the Museum of the Varendra Research Society*, Rahshahi, Varendra Research Society, 1919.

<sup>32</sup> Nalini Kanta Bhattasali, *Iconography of Buddhist and Brahmanical Sculptures in the Dacca Museum*, Dhaka, 1929

<sup>33</sup> Susan L. Huntington, *Pala Sena School of Sculpture*, Leiden: Brill, 1984, p. 2

<sup>34</sup> Stella Kramrisch, *Pala and Sena Sculpture*, Rupam, XL (October 1929), 107-26

<sup>35</sup> Rakhal Das Banerjee, *Eastern Indian School of Medieval Sculpture*, ASI, XLVII (Delhi, 1933)

<sup>36</sup> S.K. Saraswati, *Tantrayana Art: An Album*, Kolkata: The Asiatic Society, 2003 (Reprint).

region of Comilla district, Bangladesh.<sup>37</sup> The images after being produced were transported and circulated in large numbers not only within the Bengal region but also outside Suvarnadwip and Arakan. Overwhelming emphasis on the iconographic details has limited the scope of their study in the social and anthropological context.

### **Research Question**

The previous studies, focusing on the philosophical and artistic aspects of tantric Buddhism have paid little attention to its historical development. The present research attempts to bring a new understanding of the emergence and development of tantric Buddhism in early medieval Bengal's regional context by juxtaposing the literary and material evidence together. A few works highlighting the historical aspect have been done in the broader context of the sub-continent, often talking about the different tantric orders like Saiva, Sakta, Vaishnava, and Buddhism as a whole. The specificity of tantric Buddhism in early medieval Bengal, which was situated at a cultural crossroads, requires further investigation to bear out the distinct characteristic trends of an enigmatic cult.

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 Saiva and Sakta. We have tried to understand how the different characteristics of tantric Buddhism were intermingling with the erstwhile Mahayana 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 Vajrayana and Mantrayana under specific circumstances? We have also endeavored 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 Sakta, Baul, or Islamic Sufi.

In what ways the early medieval Buddhist vihara of Bengal like Mainamati, Jagajjivanpur, Nalanda, Vikramshila, Odantapuri, Sompuri, and Jagaddala can be contextualized in contemporary tantric Buddhism? If the material remains of the viharas and their architectural pattern speak for any correspondence with the Tantric Buddhist ideas. Looking beyond the material culture of the Buddhist viharas and taking into account their cultural depiction in the texts may provide a ground to speculate their tantric implications. Whether we can identify the specific cultural zone of Tantric Buddhism by mapping the

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<sup>37</sup> Claudine Bautze-Picron, 'Moving Images Between Bihar and Bengal in the Nine and Tenth Centuries', in *Pratnatattva*, Vol. 22, June 2016, pp. 85-91.

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 Aksobhya, Avalokitesvara, and different forms of Tara as well as the demonic wrathful deities like Heruka, Yamantaka, Parṇaśavarī, Jānguli, and Kurukualla? Does the particular mundane purpose of the *laukika* deities like anti-epidemic, protector of the stupa, 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, to understand 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 viharas. The primary literary sources might be divided into two categories for the understanding of the layers of tantric development in Buddhism. On the one hand, there were travelogues by Chinese pilgrims like Xuanzang (7<sup>th</sup> century), Yijing (8<sup>th</sup> century), and Sheng-chi (8<sup>th</sup> century) who recorded their first-hand experiences or facts they came to know from 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 the different sub-regions of Bengal at different times left a vivid description of the Buddhist culture and practice thereof. By considering their records we might identify the condition and development of Buddhism in different subregions of Bengal.

A few texts of the huge corpus of tantric Buddhist literature dated roughly from the 7<sup>th</sup> century onwards can be presumably placed in eastern India. These texts are mostly known from the Tibetan catalog *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.<sup>38</sup> Based on the esoteric doctrines, rites, and practices in a highly obscure language, the whole body of Sanskrit Buddhist literature is divided into two groups: *Rgyud* or Tantra and *Mdo* or Buddhist sutra. It is often difficult to determine whether a particular text belongs to the Tantra or Sutra category as their content and subject matter overlap. S.K. De has opined that this group

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<sup>38</sup> Nupur Dasgupta, 'Sanskrit Literature and Technical Treatises', in Ranabir Chakrabarti and Abdul M. Chowdhury (eds), *History of Bangladesh*, Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, p. 546

of texts are meant for limited sectarian purposes and they often possess little literary interest.<sup>39</sup> The ancient tantra of Indic origin, recorded in the *rNyīng ma* (Ancient Tantra) literature<sup>40</sup> can be further divided into four classes Tantra *kriya*, *carya*, *yoga*, and *anuttarayoga*.<sup>41</sup> We have surveyed *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa* and the *Tārāmūlakalpa* falling under the class of Kriya Tantra. They form a miscellaneous collection of largely magical texts that contain an array of rituals designed to achieve a variety of worldly (*laukika*) goals.

Apart from the textual source, the present research also considers a host of archaeological evidence as the key elements to understanding the tantric Buddhist ritual and culture in early medieval Bengal. Unlike the textual corpora which are extremely difficult to contextualize in a spatio-temporal frame, the Buddhist sculptures and material remain 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. S.K. Saraswati has observed that the rise of Tantra in eastern India coincided with the Eastern India School of Art (8<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> centuries) and argued that the school gave an impetus to the flourishing of Tantrayana Art.<sup>42</sup>

## Methodology

The origin and development of tantric Buddhism in early medieval Bengal shall be studied by consulting both the textual and archaeological (sculpture, painting, and excavated remains of the viharas) sources in a combined manner. Combined use of the sources may aid us in understanding the various characteristic trends of Tantric Buddhism in a particular spatio-temporal context as manifested in texts, images, paintings, and excavated remains. The comparative investigation of the literary and archaeological sources may help in locating the particular trends that became dominant in the literary and visual mediums of tantric Buddhism. The Buddhist viharas have been analyzed in the light of Chinese travelogues and excavation reports to understand their spatial distribution, phases of development, and particular

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<sup>39</sup> S.K. De, 'Sanskrit Literature', in R.C. Majumder (ed) *History of Bengal*, Patna: N.V. Publication, 1970 (Reprint) Vol. 1, p. 328

<sup>40</sup> Orna Almogi, 'The Human Behind the Divine: Some Reflection on the Scriptural Evolution of the Ancient Tantras (*rNyīng rgyud*)', in Volker Caumanns Marta Sarnesi and Nikolai Solmsdorf (eds), *Unearthing Himalayan Treasure: Festschrift for Franz-Karl Ehrhard*, Marburg: Indica et Tibetica Verlag, pp. 13-21.

<sup>41</sup> Paulo William and Anthony Tribe, *Buddhist Thought: A Complete Introduction to the Indian Tradition*, London: Routledge, 2000, p. 203.

<sup>42</sup> Sarasi Kumar Saraswati, *Tantrayāna Art: An Album*, Calcutta: The Asiatic Society, 1977. p, III-XI.

architectural features. Land grant inscriptions have been consulted to understand the resource base and patronage pattern of the Buddhist viharas.

The tantric Buddhist texts have been dealt with by analyzing their various editions and translations, numerous manuscripts, their findspots, and 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 provenance of the Buddhist images, preserved in the different museums of Bangladesh and West Bengal has 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 analyzed with both iconographical and extra-iconographical aspects with overwhelming weightage to their socio-religious implication.

The above problems have been addressed in the four chapters of the present research. The first chapter, **Polity, Society and Historical Context: Tracing the Background of Tantric Buddhism 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, followed by an account of the ruling dynasties and their centers of power. We have also reviewed the early medieval state formation process and social stratification.

In the second chapter, **Sacred Landscape and Traces of Tantrism in the Monastic Culture of Buddhist Viharas**, we have tried to understand the possible role of Buddhist monasteries in projecting tantric ideas. We have mapped the rise of the reputed Buddhist viharas and shrines like Nalanda, Vikramsila, Sompura, and Mainamati that coincided with the Pala, 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 viharas within the broader ambit of tantric Buddhism.

In the third chapter, **Textual Tradition: Understanding Tantric Trends 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*, *Niṣpaṇṇayogāvalī*, *Sādhnamālā*, and *Caryāpada*. By discussing the diverse ritualistic traditions of the anthological and iconographical texts like *Sādhnamālā*, *Niṣpaṇṇayogāvalī*,

and *Caryāpada* we have tried to show the heterogenous ritual, practice, and ideologies of Tantric Buddhism in Bengal.

The fourth chapter, **Tantric Deities: Visual-Physical Evidence**, deals with the Buddhist stone and metal sculptures as well as the painted manuscripts to cull out the significant aspect of the material culture of tantric Buddhism in early medieval Bengal. We have emphasized the complexities of the ritual method of worship and the various social functions of the Buddhist deities to understand their socio-cultural aspect.

### **Conclusion:**

The present study reveals, after the survey of literary and archaeological evidence, that Buddhism took a new turn in the early medieval Bengal in the light of its peculiar ritual practice. Though this phenomenon has been commonly regarded as tantric, we can keenly note its several idealistic variants like Vajrayana, Mantrayana, Kalacakrayana, and Sahajayana which possessed several idealistic paradoxes. From the analysis of both the textual and imagery sources, we might surmise that it developed as a composite culture by incorporating the 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. The verse of *Caryāpada*, composed by the Sahajiya Buddhist sect, regarded the domba women (dombi) as a metaphor for Sunyata or Nairātma who was an important goddess in *Hevajratantra* and *Sādhanamālā*. The outer circle of the mandalas, described in the *Niṣpannayogāvalī* also accommodated Candālī and Mātangi as Buddhist-deified versions of lower strata. The origin, thus can be traced in the process of ritual cultural reciprocation between Mahayana Buddhism and the already extant occult practices.

Beyond this binary of cultural assimilation from within the region itself, early medieval Bengal also witnessed a cultural confluence of sub-Himalayan, Tibetan, Nepalese, and southeast Asian elements created by the constant influx of spiritually inclined populace into the region. The resident monks of the Buddhist viharas also travelled to different locations of this network for proselytizing and learning. The Buddhist viharas of Nalanda, Vikramsila, Sompura, and Odantapuri became an integral part of an esoteric network in the maritime Bay of Bengal developing interconnectedness with multiple cultural 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 Bengal.

The tantric Buddhist images and texts of early medieval Bengal also explicitly show the practice of display and worship of power. On the one hand, the mystic ascetic groups called the siddhacaryas came to be widely venerated for their supernatural power or Siddhi. On the other, hand the element of fear and wrathfulness was infused in the iconography of several Buddhist deities like Yamari, Yamantaka, Hevajra, Parnaśavarī, and Bhṛkūti Tārā. The rise of these fringe deities and their fierce expression alongside the compassionate bodhisattva figures marked a new turn in the Buddhist divine pantheon. The idea and idiom of these deities and their mantra and mandala inextricably showed that tantric Buddhism was principally centered around the exhibition and worship of power, probably to pacify the social anxiety created by contemporary societal and political relations. The tantric ideas even survived 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.