

Abstract

The Tantric Turn in Buddhism: Exploring its Origin and Development in Early Medieval Bengal (6th – 12th centuries CE)

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The present research aims to understand the conspicuous processes and features of certain aspects of Buddhism, often termed tantric, in the early medieval Bengal (6th – 12th 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 7th 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 6th – 12th 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*, *Sāadhanamālā*, *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.

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 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 (7th century), Yijing (8th century), and Sheng-chi (8th 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.

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

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*, *Sāadhanamālā*, and *Caryāpada*. By discussing the diverse ritualistic traditions of the anthological and iconographical texts like *Sāadhanamālā*, *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 *Hevajrat Tantra* and *Sādhnamālā*. 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 Bhṛkūṭi 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.