

NON-BRAHMANICAL RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND PRACTICES IN ANCIENT BENGAL DURING PALA RULE: A HISTORICAL STUDY

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Abstract

Bengal is the name of that eastern region of India which geographically extends from the Himalaya in the north to the Bay of Bengal in the south and the Brahmaputra and Subarnarekha as its east and western boundaries. During the Gupta rule in India the Aryan culture slowly invaded into far-reaching Bengal. In imperial Gupta's rule Bengal became the land of Aryan brahmanas with Sanskrit language and the culture spread all over the Bengal. After the decline of imperial Gupta rule Bengal as well as the other geographical areas of India appear to have been ruled over by the independent rulers. In Bengal Sasanka was the first mighty and independent ruler and after his death for a long-time anarchy prevailed, the people of Bengal elected Gopal from which the rule of Pala dynasty started. In this period of Bengal became the land of non-Brahmanical religion and culture by the patronization of Pala kings. During the Palas rule Buddhism spread throughout the Bengal and the Tantric Buddhism also was in practice. Buddhism was flung open associated with esoterism, belief in Gods, demons and Ghosts, Magic etc. and again with these added elements of Yoga, Hatha - Yoga, Laya-Yoga, Mantra-Yoga and Raja -Yoga. The Tantric Buddhism developed three specific branches- Vajra Yana and Kalachakra Yana and Sahaja Yana or Sahajiya, influenced on the minor sects of Bengal. The lower section of the Bengali society was embraced towards the Buddhist Sahajiya religious beliefs and practices.

Keywords: Bengal, Non-Brahmanical, Pala, Patronization, Buddhism, Tantra, Sahajiya.

Introduction

There were certain religious traditions of India without which the history of India might be incomplete. The cultural traditions of Indian people tied with the religious practices and beliefs. C.N. Krishna Swami Iyer rightly said that 'The soul of Hindu civilization is at once made out to be in the religious India'.¹ Orthodox Hinduism is the major religion in India. Later this Hinduism began to metamorphose with the rapid growth of the Puranas and Dharma sastras. As a result, several sect and sub-sects emerged out of belief in polytheism. In tracing the origin and antiquity of Vedic religion in Bengal, it is observed that the Vedic Aryan came to close contact with the far-reaching geographical area like Bengal, a very later after the influence made in northern side of India. Bengal slowly influenced by the Vedic Aryan religion and culture. The land granting to the Brahmins for their religious performance proved this notion. Brahmins of the Rig Vedic, Yajur Vedic (Vajasaneya) and Sama Vedic schools belonging to Bharadvaya, Bhargava, Vatsya, Goutama, Kanva, Kashyapa, Kundinya and many other Gotras were settled in Bengal and performed 'Agnihotra' and five 'Mahayajnas' (great sacrifices).²

The empirical Guptas were the patroniser of the Vedic culture since 4th century to 8th century CE and for this royal patronization a vast geographical area was came under the Vedic religious rituals and domination of Brahmins, which possible to undergone the non-Vedic

sect, in a very subdued manner. Vaishnavism spread out in Bengal, with various forms of Avatars (incarnations), the Shusunia cave inscriptions of Bankura proved that Vaishnava popularity in Bengal, king Chandra Varman was depicted it, probably at 4th century CE. During the region of Harshvardhan, this Brahmin culture becoming popular in Bengal.³ The people of Bengal were dominated by the rites, rituals, and different ceremonies developed through the Aryanization. Aryans could ultimately penetrate into the inner recess of life of the people and made striking changes in the life ways and thought ways of the people of Bengal. The lower sections of the people with meagre economic means and the tribal perspective could maintain their traditional patterns of life. The Hindu kings were ruled in Bengal. Brahmins were the sole conductors of Vedicism, owing to royal patronage, Vedic sacrifices were performed by them. The Puranas, and Smriti sastras gave detail reference to this Vedic culture. The epigraphic record also shown the Vedic religious performance during the Pala rule.

Orthodox Hinduism which was the major religion of the then India consolidated its culture on the enlightenment of Vedic's but this Vedic's in its short journey resulted to uplift the rise of Buddhism. According to the 'Kalpasutra' of Bhadrabahu in Bengal there was the different non-Vedic culture prevailed.⁴ during the 4th century Bengal came under the direct political control by the imperial Guptas, the Aryanized history begins from this period. Under the Gupta Suzerainty Bengal became a territory (319-320 CE). During the reign of the Samudra Gupta Samatata and Pundravardhana (north Bengal) were the part of Gupta Empire ⁵. The king was Singha Varman and his son Chandra Varman.⁶ More than 200 years of Gupta rule, Bengal became the land of Aryan Brahmins and the Sanskrit language and culture. Vedas, Upanishads, Ramayana, Mahabharata, Puranas, and many Aryans Sanskrit literature comes to close contact with the Bengali speaking people.⁷ Bengal becoming the geo-cultural part of Aryan culture of Brahmins and the religious authorities of Brahmins. Due to this cultural domination over Bengal the pre-Aryan socio-cultural scenario have challenged and changed. The non-Vedic, non-Brahminical culture and languages were became inferior and they have to subdue their activities in secret manner as before. The Gupta rule lasted for an over 200 years in Bengal. The whole of Bengal thoroughly involved with the Vedic Hindu culture and which rapidly absorbing many non-Aryan elements, regional heritage, the folk traditions, mass religion etc.⁸ The most important evidence of the strong hold Vedic culture in Bengal is the large number of land grants to the Brahmins for their religious activities. Lands were granted to the Brahmins as they are the royal priest and responsible authorities for performing of the Vedic rites rituals and ceremonies. The establishment of the political power of the Guptas in Bengal must have not only quickened the pace of this immigrants but also given an ascendancy to the orthodox followers of the dominant Brahminical religion. Rama Chatterjee in his book 'Religion in Bengal: 'Pala and Sena' stated that "inkulaji text literature described that there were no Brahmins in Bengal and it was king Adisura of Gauda who brought 5 Brahmins to his court from Kanauj, Benaras or Kolancha in the Saka year 654=732 CE. The Bengal Brahmins traced their descendants from those Brahmins who were brought by the king Adisura. These five Brahmins split in two groups as the Radhi Brahman and Varendra Brahman."⁹ During the decline of the Gupta Empire, Bengal appears to have

been ruled over by independent rulers named Gopal Chandra, Dharmaditya and Sumakaradeva mention in copper plate grants.¹⁰

Towards the middle of the 6th century CE. Gauda becoming the powerful state with the leadership of Sasanka. The Gauda becoming the center of power and it extended its rule up to Kanyakubja in the west and Ganjam(Orissa) in the south. But all of a sudden Sasanka lost his power by Bhaskar Varma, King of Kamrupa, yet Sasanka retrieved his power and position.¹¹ Sasanka was the first King of Bengal who extended his Suzerainty over the territory far beyond the geographical boundary of that province.¹² The capital was Karna Suvarna, from Banabhatta's 'Harshacharita' and an account of Chinese pilgrim Hiuen-Tsang provided immense information about the period. The death of Sasanka brings a political disaster in Bengal and the neighboring State including northern part of India. Capital city passed to other hand the two part-northern Pundravardhana, Karnasubarna, Samatata, and Tamralipti, Bardhaman, Birbhum, Murshidabad and Nadia were loosened after the death of Sasanka. Bengal becoming the state of anarchy, the neighboring states targeting to occupy the fertile land of Bengal and the wealth of this region. In the last phase the ruler of Bengal lost his life in a defensive battle with Magadha attacked by Yashovarman the king of Kanyakubja. In 8th century the king of Bengal another ruler Lalitaditya slain by the king of Kashmir.¹³

After a long period of anarchy which is historically known as 'Matsyanaya' the people of Bengal elected Gopala as their king 750 CE approx., Gopal founded the Pala dynasty.¹⁴ Since 8th century and continued till 1140 CE to the reign of Madan Pala. According to historian Taranath Gopala succeeded by his son Dharma Pala he extended the power from Kedar in Himalaya up to Gokarna in Maharashtra.¹⁵ According to Tibetan record, Dharma Pala was a great patron of Buddhism. He had founded the Vikramsila Mahavihara in Magadh, on the top of the hill of Bank of Ganges, in which 114 teachers in different subjects employed. Dharmapala also built-up a beautiful monastery at Odanta puri, Somapuri Bihar at Paharpur in Rajshahi district and more than 50 religious schools were founded by Dharmapala himself.¹⁶ Dharmapala was a Buddhist king but he was not against any other existing religious Practice and also encouraged the Brahminical religion too. It is said that he granted the land for the worship for the Brahminical rites and rituals and followed the caste system of the Bengali society. Brahmana Garga was his minister. Buddhist writer Haribhadra appreciate the ruling of Dharmapala. During his reign for the good administration peace and prosperity has established in Bengal. Deva Pala who succeeded the throne about 810 CE. Darbhapani and Kedar Mishra were two prominent brahmana served as the minister of his court. Deva Pala extended his supremacy over a vast area,¹⁷ including Pragjyotishas, Utkalas, Hunas, Gurjaras and Dravidas. Deva Pala ruled (810-850 CE) under him the Pala empire Reached Its highest of its Glory.¹⁸ The Monastery of Nalanda was the center of the international Buddhist teaching and culture. Deva Pala was the chief patron and held high position in the Buddhist world. But the glory and brilliancy did not long last after the Deva Pala. The Vighraha Pala took the throne (850-854 CE) after him Narayan Pala (854-908 CE) to whom the Pala empire was attacked by the hill tribe called Kamboja was repulsed by the next king Mahi Pala. Mahi Pala was succeeded by his son Naya Pala who ruled during 1038 to 1034 CE. These kings were weak in administration and did not controlled social uprisings against the Palas. During this period Kaivarta, a sub caste revolted against the Palas under the

leadership of Divyoka in north Bengal. The next pala ruler Rama Pala the noted Pala king was defeated by the Kaivarta leader Vima. since the Pala empire caused to declined its imperial rule. Towards the end of 11th century last Pala king Madan Pala defeated by Varman dynasty and the new rule begins in Bengal. During the rule of pala there were several independent and semi-independent power existed, among these two notable dynasties were Chandras and Varmans. In eastern Bengal, Chandra dynasty ruled since 6th to 8th century some prominent Chandra ruler was-Purnachandra, Suvarnachandra, Trilokyachandra, Srichandra, Kalyanchandra, Ladachandra, Gobindachandra, till 1035 CE the Chandra dynasty ruled over eastern of the Bengal. Another dynasty was Varman was succeeded by Chandras in Eastern Bengal.¹⁹ Hari Varman was the most notable ruler of this dynasty. Probably in the 1st half of the 12th century, Vijay Sena of the Sena dynasty dealt the death blow to this dynasty.²⁰

Palas were the staunch Buddhist, yet they shown tolerance to the Vedic and other religious sects. Buddhism becoming royal religion of Pala king in Bengal. According to the Chinese account of Hiuen Tsang, Kajugala (Rajmahal), Pundravarddana (North Bengal), Somatata (South east Bengal), Tamralipta (Midnapur) and Karnasuvarna (Muslimabad),²¹ were the prominent place of Buddhist Monasteries which indicates the Buddhist popularity among the people of Bengal during the rule of Pala. At the reign of Deva Pala, the glory of Buddhism acquired an international fame. A series of works on the tantric culture were composed in his time denoted, flourishing state of Tantrism in the sphere of Buddhism in Bengal. The most remarkable matter was that the Buddhist monks were known as 'Siddhas, developed 'esoteric cults' of Vajrayana, Shajayana and many other minor Yanas.²² After Deva Pala, his successors Sura Pala- I, Vigra Pala- I, Narayan Pala, Rajya Pala, Gopala-II and Vighraha Pala-II, approx. 140 years of reign was an epoch of making age of the Tantric Buddhism. Soma Pala of Bangla became the principal headquarters of tantric Buddhism during the period.²³

The Vajrayana Buddhism acquired a firm footing in the soil of Bengal. This was an esoteric cult constituting mantras, mudras, mandalas and many peculiar ideas. The esoteric mysticism so widely encroached that gave the privilege to development of the Sahajana, Kalachakra Yana and many other minor Yana's in Bengal during 9th to 12th century CE. The esoteric culture like Vajrayana Buddhism. During the Palas rule the Buddhist religion flourished in its high extent. Specifically, from 9th to 12th century Buddhist religion transformed into a yogic- Tantric religion and spread and became popular among the people of Bengal. Hindu Saiva, Agam, and Saiva- Sakatism mixed with Hatha yoga and Pranga-Upayavada formed the shape of Vajrajana and at last it became in the full from of Shajiya Yana. This religion combinate with pleasure and penance and that's why it became acceptable for all. The lower section people of Bengal specifically embraced towards this religion.²⁴

H.P.Sastri maintains that the sain Lui preached the Sahajiya doctrine among the Buddhist in the 9th century CE ²⁵, numerous Sanskrit and Bengali works that's had been translated in the Tibetan language. In which it was reflected that Buddhist Sahajiya did not acknowledge the authority of Vedas ²⁶. The minor religious Sects of Bengal also against the

Vedic culture and religious practice. They do not believe in the sacrificial observations as like as the Buddhist Sahajiya cult. The Buddhist Sahajiya have no faith in the existence of God 27. Vaisnava Sahajiya proclaimed that man is potentially superior to God, the statement like that “God can never be equal to man, God can never know the secrets of human nature God can never adopt the nature of man” 28.

Tantrism is a popular cult in India and Bengal as well. The ‘carrya padas’ described the nature of Tantrism and its religious doctrine. The ideas of nerves, chakras, yoginis have been celebrated in this system 32. During 9th century A.D, several sand stone Siva- Linga with four seated shakti’s on four sides have been discovered from north Bengal. Which indicated that the Tantric mode of worship was much more practiced in the early medieval period in Bengal. Tantra itself has accommodated a glorious place for the phallic emblems of Lord Siva 29. With the development of Sakti cult in Bengal the tantric religious culture also spread throughout in Bengal during 10th to 12th century. Primarily it was stated with Siva - Parvati, but later it transformed into many different Tantric iconography, like Durga, Tara, Chhinyamasta, Chandi, kubjika, kali etc 30. The BrihatSanhita described the details about tantric cult prevailed in Bengal. In ‘Devi Purana the words used frequently -like ‘tantras’ and ‘agamas’ which indicated the different works on kala Tantra, Garuda Tantra, Mula Tantra, Bhargava Tantra, Vala Tantra 31. The text of Chandi of ‘Markandeya-Purana’ described every detail on tantric Hinduism in Bengal. The ‘Dasamaha vidya’ also tells the tantric practice in Bengal.

During the Palas rule Buddhism spread throughout the Bengal and the Tantric Buddhism also was in practice. In north Bengal there was the monastery named Devikot, in where Tantric cultures were in practiced. The ‘Pag-Som-Joh-Zang’ mentions the Pandita vihara of Chittagong which was great centre of Tantric learning and culture 32. The last Pala king, Rama Pala founded the grand vigraha of jagadala, in which he installed the images of Avalokitesvara and Maha Tara, so, the Mahayana Buddhism began to be eclipsed by Vajrayana Buddhism. In this Buddhist culture, the female consort was being an essential part of a state of union (Yuganaddha), The Baul of Bengal later incorporated this culture in their religious practices 33. The concept of ‘mahasukha’ or the supreme Bliss incorporated into the Mahayana Buddhism. In due course of time the shakti worship of Hindu Tantricism eclipsed by the Buddhist Tantra during the last Pala time 34. The worship of Tara invaded from China, introduced in Buddhist Tantra, Tara tantra and which transformed into the Vajrayana and Kalachakra Yana Buddhist Tantricism 35.

Now, the Buddhism were flung open associated with esoterism, belief in Gods, demons and Ghosts, Magic etc and again with these added elements of Yoga, Hatha -Yoga, Laya-Yoga, Mantra-Yoga and Raja -Yoga. All these elements made for the growth of the elaborate system of Tantric Buddhism 36. In course of evolution the sexo-yogic practice became the most important esoteric practice to attainment of the final state supreme bliss or the ‘mahasukha’ 37. Through the sexo-yogic practice the attainment of ‘sahaja’ possible. There are controlling of vital winds (prana vayu and apanavayu) is also an important thing. Another thing in this sahaja -yana is that ‘Sunnyavada’ which incorporated from Vajrayana doctrine, where male and female treated as the Purusha and Prakriti, through the yogic practices the

Purusha and Prakriti make united with and ultimately attain the stage of supreme bliss or Mahasukha.

The religious procedure is guided by the preceptor or Guru; and performed through the esoteric and mystic sexual practice. The place and position of the Guru (the preceptor) is highest to the disciple, his advice have to obeyed. If Guru favours him nothing is unattainable, even enjoyment of the five kinds of sexual pleasure (pancha-kamobhogad) which is fatal for the ignorant persons, brings forth salvation to a disciple if he enjoys it after having instruction from the preceptor or Guru. This new sexo-yogic practice of the sahajiya cult for the attainment of the Mahasukha called 'Kaya Sadhana'. Siddhacharyas of the sahajiya cult believes that there are 32 nerves channels (nadis) with in the human body like-Lalana, Rasana, Avadhuti, Pravana etc. which are later transformed in its new terminology as Ida, Pingala and susumna of the Hindu Tantra 38. The Esoteric cults accepted all these sexo-yogic practices in their religious way. The followers of this religious way ignored the study of different traditional lore's and scripts like Vedas, the Vedangas and Sutras etc., 39. There was a rapid assimilation of the tantra in to the different Vedic and non-Vedic or obscure religious cult, the mantras and nadis, Lalana, Rasana, Avadhuti of Buddhist Tantra were incorporated in the different religious sect in the name as ida, pingala, susumna 40. In Hinduism the Tantric cult flourished in its new formation 'Dasamahavidyaas' (ten mahavidyas) incorporated and developed a new conception of chinnamasta, the worshiper of chhinnamunda (cut head), vajra yogi and chamunda, kali, Bhadrakali, were accepted and honoured in the field of Hindu Tantra 41. The Buddhist prajna and upaya transformed into the idea of the void knowledge of nature and positive universal compassion, now, the male and female yogic union is followed. In esoteric way of sadhana this idea of Tantric Buddhism is strictly followed by the sadhak and his sadhansangini with the direct guidance of the Guru or the preceptors 42. Through this sexo-yogic practices with the instructions of the preceptor or the Guru, it is like juice extracted from sugarcane through pressure, like great light produced by the couples through their intense love in copulation, like cream produced in milk through churning, like the most substantial thing 'ghrita' (clarified butter) produced in cream through the power of heat, like hard pottery produced from mud through the power of whirling, like the best potency (wine) produced in grapes 43.

The Tantric Buddhism developed three specific branches- Vrajayana and Kalachakra yana and Sahaja Yana or Sahajiya, influenced on the minor sects of Bengal. The lower section of the Bengali society was embraced towards the Buddhist Sahajiya religious believes 44. Sahajayans were divided into two sections, one practiced Yoga with the help of female consort and other section practiced without the consort. Which section practiced without consort came to be called 'Natha dharma' or 'Sarva dharma'.

The Senas were the followers of Brahmanism and strictly opposed the spread of Buddhist religious activities prevailed in Bengal. They encouraged for the Vedic religion and Brahmins were allowed to settled in Bengal. The Sena king VallalaSena (1158 AD -1179AD) was extremely against Buddhism and he in his book 'Dana Sagara', declares himself to as an incarnation of Narayana for uprooting the heretics. VallalaSena was also the followers and full supporters of the caste system, the 'Chaturvarna' system was strictly implemented during

his time in Bengal. The lower caste section of the society of Bengal at that time were treated as the 'untouchables' and were excluded from the upper class and caste Hindu society. As the Senas were Vaishnavite, so, the traditional Buddhist culture and practices were in a new distress. Buddhist and other non-Vedic, non-Brahmanical creeds were bound to subdue their religious practices during the Senas ruling, but in a very silent manner the Buddhist Sahajiya with vajrayani doctrine and Nathism continued religious tradition in the lower section of the Bengali society. Vaishnava Sahajiya doctrine of the love of Radha - Krishna becoming popular during Sena's rule. In Islamic Bengal this vaishnavite trend encouraged by the Goudiya Vaishnavism of Mahaprabhu Sri Chaitanya of Nadia.

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