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## **The Decline of Buddhism and the Revival of Theravada Buddhism in Bangladesh: A Study**

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### **Abstract**

This study deciphers the historical trajectory of Buddhism in Bangladesh, focusing on its decline following the Pala Empire and its revival under British colonial rule. Based on epigraphic, literary and archaeological evidence, it points to a convergence of factors—state-run persecution, a withdrawal of royal patronage, the ascendancy of Brahmanical orthodoxy, religious atrocities and the influence of Tantric forms of worship—that resulted in the decline of Buddhist institutions and doctrinal rigour. The paper draws attention to, and documents instances of, the survival of Buddhist Practices in the Chittagong and Chittagong Hill Tract areas; isolation and cultural links with Arakan supporting continuity. The colonial period offered a fertile ground for revival through the influence of Arakanese refugees, transregional monastic networks, and reformist figures like Saramedha Mahathera and Queen Kalindi. Through institutional reforms, lay-monastic cooperation, and the adoption of Theravada principles, a distinct Buddhist identity was reasserted. Hence, this work contributes to understanding how religious traditions regenerate amidst persecution, displacement, and cultural syncretism.

**Keywords:** Buddhist Revival, Colonial Bengal, Decline of Buddhism, Tantrism, Theravada Buddhism, Religious Persecution, Religious Syncretism

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## Introduction

Historians have referred to the period in Bengal from the fall of the Pala Empire to the advent of British rule as the “Dark Age of Buddhism.” (Bandhopadhyaya, 1989: 167) Scholars have identified several reasons for this decline, including the lack of royal patronage, persecution by non-Buddhist rulers, the destruction of Buddhist monasteries, forced conversions, and the loss of distinct characteristics in Tantric Buddhism. Due to these factors, Buddhism in Bangladesh experienced significant decline, losing its former glory and transforming into a tradition dominated by folk practices. This dissertation will examine the state of Buddhism in Bangladesh during the period between the fall of the Pala Empire and the beginning of British rule, as well as the cultural practices of that era. Furthermore, it will explore how Buddhism declined during this period and how Theravada Buddhism experienced a revival under British rule.

## Oppression by non-Buddhist rulers

After the fall of the Pala dynasty, Bengal was ruled by the Varman and Sen dynasties. Historical records indicate that the rulers of these dynasties were orthodox and intolerant. Consequently, they governed the state and public life according to the principles of Brahmanical religion, such as the Vedas, Mahābhārata, and Smṛiti. (Ray, 1402: 412) Such comprehensive efforts to control public life, society, and culture are rare in the history of Bengal. Evidence of this can be found in the inscriptions discovered from the Varman and Sen periods. These inscriptions were enriched with the descriptions of Brahmanical rituals, Smṛiti, worship, ceremonies, purification through bathing, fasting, and Vedic and Puranic rituals. All the land grants made during this period were exclusively given to Brahmins. There is no evidence of land donations to Buddhist monasteries or monks. Although Buddhist monasteries and monks still existed during this time, there is no record of patronization of state toward Buddhists. On the contrary, the harmony and brotherhood that developed during the Pala period were destroyed, and conflicts between Brahmanism

and Buddhism became apparent. State support further fueled this conflict, especially during the Varman and Sen rules, when the rivalry became more intense. The rulers of both dynasties were followers of Shaivism and Vaishnavism. Under their patronage, these religious cults gained the status of state religion and exerted significant influence over the general population. During this time, religious practices in Bengal became dominated by the teachings of the Vedas, Mahābhārata, Smritis, Shrutis, and astrology. (Bhattacharya, 1378: 244) On the other hand, Buddhism faced oppression instead of patronage. Due to a lack of support, hostility, exploitation, and persecution, Buddhism, its institutions, and followers faced a dire crisis. Moreover, Buddhists were subjected to derogatory language and humiliation. Literature and decrees produced during the reigns of the Varman and Sen dynasties provide ample evidence of the condemnation of Buddhists.

In Dhaka district, an inscription of the fourth Varman king, Maharajadhiraja Bhojavarman (approximately 1020–1055 CE), was discovered, known as the “Belabo Inscription”. This inscription was inscribed during the fifth year of his reign. In the fifth verse of the inscription, it is stated: “The Vedas are the true attire of a man, and without them, a man is naked.” Scholars believe that Buddhists did not hold the Vedas in reverence, and this statement was intended as a mocking remark directed at them. Nalininath Dasgupta and Upendranath Bhattacharya assert that the satirical tone in this statement aimed at Buddhists is evident. (Dasgupta, 1355: 218; Bhattacharya, 1378: 248) Additionally, the second ruler of the Varman dynasty, Harivarman, through his general Bhavadeva Bhatta, described Buddhists in a eulogistic verse as “the Agastya of the ocean,” implying derision. These instances provide clear evidence of the mockery faced by Buddhists during the reign of the Varman dynasty.

During this period, the *Dan Sagar* text exhibited the most notable expressions of condemnation and hatred toward Buddhists. Due to the Buddhist influence present in the *Shaivite* and *Vaishnavite Mahābhārata*, these texts were disregarded in *Dan Sagar*. The text also mentions that King Ballal Sen was born to sever

the legs of heretics and atheists. Scholars believe that “heretics and atheists” referred to Buddhists, and the hostility and hatred of Brahmins toward Buddhists were a direct or indirect result of King Ballal Sen’s influence. Commenting on King Ballal Sen, Nalininath Dasgupta wrote that Ballal Sen’s intolerance and hatred toward other religions not only dishonored the royal throne but also deeply divided the soul of Bengal. (Dasgupta, 1355: 221) In this context, Niharranjan Ray’s observations are significant. He wrote, “In general, the Varman and Sen dynasties do not appear to have shown much respect or sympathy toward Buddhism or its community. Whether through direct oppression or indirect insults and disrespect, they made no effort to refrain from persecuting Buddhists.” (Ray, 1402: 667) During this time, Brahmanical Hinduism gained increasing influence and power, while Buddhism struggled to survive. It is believed that, for survival, many Buddhists resorted to conversion, and their religious institutions fell under Brahmanical control. In these institutions, Hindu deities and idols replaced the Buddhist ones. Evidence supporting this theory comes from the discovery of both Buddhist and Hindu deities statues in the ruins of sites like Somapura Mahavihara, Shalban Vihara, Sitakot Vihara, Bhasu Vihara, Rupban Mura Vihara, Triratna Mura Vihara, Ananda Raja’s palace, and the ruins of Mahasthangarh. According to the Nalanda inscription, Somapura Mahavihara was destroyed under the leadership of Bengal’s King Jatavarman (EI, vol. xxi : 97). Niharranjan Ray identified the destruction of Somapura Vihara as an attack or insult toward Buddhists. (Ray, 1402: 419)

During the reigns of the Varman and Sen dynasties, the unjust behavior, oppression, and hatred of the Brahmins deeply alarmed the Buddhists. There is substantial evidence of this in the *Shankara Vijaya* and *Shunya Purana* texts. The *Shunya Purana* mentions that Brahmin oppression was so intense that the Buddhists lived in constant fear, and the Brahmins showed no hesitation in stripping them of all their possessions and driving them toward destruction. (Bhikshu, 1995: 77) During this period, Tantric Buddhism, in an attempt to preserve its existence, was forced to

compromise with Hinduism. As a result, Tantric Buddhism lost its distinct features and transformed into practices such as *Sufism* and *Baulism*. Thousands of Buddhist monasteries and viharas were converted into Brahmanical temples. Many Hindu deities found their place in Buddhist shrines, while numerous Buddhist deities were transformed into Hindu ones. Over time, the distinction between Hinduism and Buddhism blurred to the point where it became difficult to identify which deities were Buddhist and which were that of the Hindus. As a result, worshipers could no longer differentiate between Buddha and Vishnu, Avalokiteshvara and Shiva, Tara and Parvati. Taking advantage of this, Brahmins skillfully incorporated Buddhist deities into their own pantheon, attempting to merge Buddhism into Hinduism. Declaring Buddha as the ninth incarnation of Vishnu was the first step in this effort. In this regard, the opinion of Dinesh Chandra Sen is noteworthy. He stated,

Many Hindu deities were adopted from Buddhist Tantra. Buddhist gods and goddesses were enshrined in Hindu temples, and Hindus appropriated them, denying their Buddhist origins. Even goddesses like Kali and Saraswati, whom we worship, were influenced by Buddhist Tantra. (Sen, 1341: 7-9)

The opinions of Dinesh Chandra Sen are supported by those of Binayatosh Bhattacharya and Nalini Kanta Bhattachali. Binayatosh Bhattacharya believes that the Buddhist goddess Vajrayogini was transformed into the Hindu goddess Chinnamasta. (Bhattacharya, 1362: 80) On the other hand, Nalini Kanta Bhattachali suggests that the Krishna idol worshiped in the Bara-Kamta Bihar temple in Tripura is actually a representation of the Buddhist deity, Jambhala. (*Pratibha*, 3rd year, 2nd issue, p. 115) Satyendranath Tagore considers the Rath-Yatra of Jagannath to be modeled after the chariot procession of the Buddhists of Khotan. (Tagore, 1308: 223) According to Nalini Nath Dasgupta, the Jagannath Temple in Puri was built on the site of an ancient Buddhist monastery, and the idols in the Jagannath Temple, including the three deities, are nothing but imitations of the Buddhist Triratna. (Dasgupta, 1355: 238)

During the rule of the Barman and Sen dynasties, while Buddhists and Buddhism faced a crisis, Buddhist monasteries and monks continued to exist. However, Buddhism lost its past glory and became faded. During this period, the fame of the Buddhist scholar Abhayakar Gupta spread across India. He became immortal for his famous work on iconography (*Murti Shastra*) called *Nispannayogavali*. Some Buddhist deities and statues from this time have been discovered, leading to the belief that the worship of deities among Buddhists continued during the Varman and Sen dynasties.

Though some Buddhist communities managed to survive around certain monasteries or viharas, by the 12th century CE, they were destroyed by the Turkish warrior Bakhtiyar Khilji's sword. The Turkish soldiers, considering the Buddhist universities as fortresses, launched a campaign of destruction. In the wake of their attacks, monks at famous monasteries like Nalanda, Odantapura, and Vikramshila lost their lives, and numerous manuscripts and books stored in the libraries of the monasteries were burned to ashes. Regarding this, Sunithananda Bhikshu wrote:

Bakhtiyar Khilji, a warlike, considered the protected monasteries to be fortified strongholds. This misconception was the root cause of the destruction. It is known that Bakhtiyar Khilji firmly believed that the peaceful, mild-mannered Buddhist monks, dressed in yellow robes and with shaven heads, were soldiers of the Portuguese. These monks were systematically killed by the Turkish soldiers, and within a short time, hundreds of resident monks lost their lives. After stripping everything from them, the monks were left to perish. At that time, Bakhtiyar noticed the prosperous library of the monastery. He called for the retrieval of the books and manuscripts, and soon learned that all those who had been there had been killed by the sword. Following Bakhtiyar's orders, the soldiers set fire to the vast library. The fire reportedly lasted for three months. After the flames had consumed everything, Bakhtiyar realized that these were not fortresses but rather rich Buddhist monasteries and universities. Perhaps this is why he named the entire region Bihar. (Bhikshu, 1995: 80)

The destruction of Buddhist monasteries by Turkish soldiers is also mentioned in the book *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri*. Quoting this text, Manikuntala Halder writes that, on the Sultan's orders, the monasteries were set ablaze with *naphtha* and turned to ashes. (Halder, 1996: 330) After the conquest of Magadh, Bakhtiyar and his soldiers attacked Bengal, defeating King Lakshana Sen and establishing their rule. Following their victory, Islam began to spread rapidly in Bengal through forced conversions. As news of the Turkish soldiers' cruelty, persecution, plundering, and killings spread, the Buddhists of Bengal were filled with fear and anxiety. At this time, many Buddhists converted to Islam to save their lives, and countless others fled to regions like Odisha, Kamrup, Arakan, Pegu, Nepal, and Tibet, taking with them their sacred idols and scriptures. During this period, the Buddhist monasteries in Bengal, devoid of monks, turned into desolate, haunted houses. These monasteries were converted into mosques and *dargahs*. The idols in Buddhist monasteries were destroyed and thrown into rivers, canals, ponds, and various subterranean places. Numerous Buddhist statues have been discovered in rivers, canals, ponds, underground sites, and the ruins of monasteries in Bangladesh, and more are still being found. Archaeologists believe that after the Muslim conquest of Bengal, the statues were indiscriminately thrown and destroyed to erase the religious practices, ceremonies, and culture of the conquered people. (Ray, 1331: 212) According to Dipak Kumar Barua and Binayendra Nath Chaudhury, during the 13th century, after the Muslim invasion, monasteries like Sompuri Mahavihara, Shalban Mahavihara, Jagaddal Mahavihara, Pandit Mahavihara, and other Buddhist monasteries in Bengal were severely damaged and left abandoned forever. These monasteries were the hub of the Buddhist practices, culture and study. When these monasteries were destroyed, the way of life of Buddhist monks came to a standstill. (Barua, 1969: 53; Chaudhury, 1969: 213)

Essentially, with the end of the Pala period, the efforts of the Varman and Sen dynasties to wipe out Buddhism and its culture in Bengal were made successful by the destructive activities of the Muslims. Due to the successive attacks, oppression, and

looting by the Varman and Sen dynasties and the Turkish soldiers, Buddhism in Bengal lost its past glory and gradually faded away. In this regard, Asha Das wrote:

Unable to find a way to protect Buddhism and its culture, the monks, ascetics, and scholars fled in all directions to save themselves. As a tragic consequence, in the land of Bengal, where Buddhism had once been able to unite everyone under the banner of victory and celebration, it began to move toward complete extinction. Due to the Turkic invasions, Buddhism, along with its education, culture, art, literature, and more, faced the cold, bleak pallor of obliteration. The hope and light that once radiated in the temples of Bengal through the call of Buddhist poets and writers slowly withered, turning into a lifeless, sorrowful role, like the lost music of a forgotten song. (Das, 1969: 205)

Although Buddhism disappeared from Bengal around the 13th century due to geopolitical reasons, a number of Buddhists managed to take refuge in Chittagong and the Chittagong Hill Tracts, and were able to sustain their existence, religion, and culture. One of the main reasons for this was that Chittagong and the Chittagong Hill Tracts were under the control of the Arakanese rulers, who were followers of Buddhism, until 1666. However, at times, these regions were also under the control of the Hindu rulers of Tripura and the Muslim rulers of Bengal. In the 17th century, Chittagong came fully under Mughal rule. With the Mughal annexation of Chittagong and the Chittagong Hill Tracts, religious conversion and the destruction of Buddhist monasteries began, and mosques and *dargahs* were constructed in place of Buddhist monasteries. As a result, Buddhism in these regions began to decline, and its influence weakened. In this regard, Mahbub Alam wrote that the spread of Tantric Buddhism, centered around the Buddhist monasteries in these regions, was significantly reduced as a result of Muslim domination. It is believed that during this period, the Buddhist monasteries were destroyed. (Alam, 1965: 46) Despite the conversion and oppression, many Buddhists in Chittagong and the Chittagong Hill Tracts managed to survive and keep the light of their religion alive, like the faint flickering flame of a lamp. The reason



for the persistence of Buddhism in these regions can be attributed to the geopolitical influence. The regions were close to the Arakan Kingdom, and the communication systems were underdeveloped. The king and people of Arakan were followers of Buddhism. As a result, despite the adversity, Buddhism managed to survive in these areas. However, over time, Buddhism in these regions faced a crisis. Especially when there were wars between the Tripura kings, Mughal rulers, and Arakanese kings over the control of these regions, the lives of Buddhist monks were once again endangered. Buddhist monks' livelihoods were dependent on the laypeople. During the wars, the local population had to bear the cost of feeding large armies. Consequently, the support for monks' livelihoods decreased, which endangered Buddhism. (Barua & Barua, 2005: 22)

### **Causes of the Decline of Buddhism**

Scholars have identified several factors for the decline of Buddhism in India and Bangladesh. (Barua, 1999: 13-31) Among the most widely accepted reasons are: (a) The infiltration of Tantrism into Buddhism (b) Persecution by non-Buddhist rulers (c) The reduction in royal patronage (d) Philosophical opposition (e) The establishment of the Bhikkhuni Sangha (order of female monks) (f) Internal conflicts within the Bhikkhu Sangha (order of monks) (g) Inability to expand social influence (h) Aging or the ancient nature of Buddhism itself. These reasons have been discussed in detail by Manikuntala Haldar in her book on the history of Buddhism. (Haldar, 1996: 321-347)

However, upon reviewing the above-mentioned reasons, it can be inferred that the decline of Buddhism in Bangladesh was not caused by any single, specific factor. Scholars have attempted to identify the causes of the decline from various perspectives. It seems unreasonable to think that the Buddhism which had profoundly influenced the life of the people in Bangladesh for centuries faced decline due to only one single reason.

Upon reviewing the above-mentioned issues, the following factors can be identified as the reasons for the decline of Buddhism in Bangladesh:

- (a) After the fall of the Pala dynasty, during the reign of the Barman-Sen dynasties, there was a significant decline in Buddhism in Bangladesh. The Brahmanical royal dynasties and the Brahmins, who gained their patronage, held anti-Buddhist attitudes and engaged in oppression, which led to this decline. One of the primary reasons for the Brahmins' anti-Buddhist attitude was that they did not want to share the royal patronage and cultural influence with the Buddhist monks. Their goal was to displace the Buddhist monks from respect and power. Moreover, the prosperity of Buddhist religion and culture was not favored by the Brahmanical rulers. Behind their disdain, there were also economic and political reasons, as Buddhists had gained considerable influence in business and commerce. These factors contributed to the decline of Buddhism.
- (b) The oppression by Turkish soldiers, the destruction of Buddhist monasteries, and forced conversions also played a significant role in the decline of Buddhism in Bangladesh. Buddhist monasteries were the heart of Buddhist rituals and practices. When these monasteries were destroyed, the monks became unable to maintain its existence.
- (c) The infiltration of Tantric practices also contributed to the decline of Buddhism. While Tantrism made Buddhism more popular, it simultaneously gave rise corruption in the faith, and brought about excessive popularization that helped to merge Buddhism into Hinduism and jeopardized the distinctive character of the religion. (Barua and Ando, : 2002: 60) Moreover, Tantric Buddhism evolved into a more simplistic form known as *Sahajiya*. The practitioners of *Sahajiya* were opposed to the disciplined life of Buddhist monasteries and monastic communities. As a result, monastic life and rituals stagnated, and the monastic order distanced itself from the support and connection with the people, which marked the beginning

of Buddhism's decline. However, the infiltration of Tantric practices was not the sole cause of Buddhism's decline. Tantric Buddhism continues to thrive in countries like Nepal, Bhutan, Tibet, China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam. In the case of Bangladesh, the evolution of Tantric Buddhism led to the rise of the *Sahajiya* sect, but such a development did not occur in other countries.

- (d) The monastic life and sustenance of the Buddhist monks depend on the support of its followers or benefactors. However, due to persecution, oppression, and forced conversion, the existence of Buddhists was threatened. As a result, the monastic order failed to receive supports and sustenance from its followers. This led to the endangerment of the monastic order's existence, which propelled Buddhism towards decline or destruction.

### **The British Rule: The Revival of Theravada Buddhism**

In 1757, the British East India Company defeated the last Nawab of Bengal, Siraj-ud-Daula, and gained dominance in the political landscape of Bengal. In 1765, the East India Company acquired the Dewani of Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa from the Mughal Emperor, marking the beginning of British rule in the region. By 1774, the East India Company had become the sovereign ruler of Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa. The farsighted British rulers did not intervene directly in religious matters. Their main goal was to strengthen their power by establishing a strong army through local people. The Buddhist population, devastated and backward due to the tyranny of the Barman-Sen and Turkish rulers, seized the opportunity to improve their fortunes by joining the British army. The efficiency of Buddhist soldiers impressed the British. Many Buddhist soldiers rose to prestigious positions in society, such as Jamadar, Subedar, Major, and Havildar. Among them, the reputations of Kalachan Subedar of Pahartali village in Chittagong, Dvipchan Subedar of Jaishtyapura, and Udaychan Jamadar of Bakkali were well-known. When the British military

cantonments were disbanded, Buddhist soldiers were employed in the police force and other respected professions. It is noteworthy that at that time, Buddhists dominated the police force. As a result, Buddhists began to establish themselves socially and economically. Over time, many Buddhists were able to acquire zamindari (landholding) positions. Instead of using the traditional 'Barua' title, the land owners used titles such as 'Jamindar,' 'Talukdar,' 'Mutsuddi,' which were bestowed upon them by the British. On the other hand, Chakma land lords started using titles like 'Talukdar' and 'Dewan' instead of 'Chakama.'

During British rule, although the Buddhists gained some financial and social status, the form of Buddhism they practiced was largely influenced by local customs. It can be said that it was a blend of local traditions, folk beliefs, Buddhist Tantric practices, and the influences of Hinduism and Islam. At that time, Buddhists observed various rituals such as Durga Puja, Kali Puja, Lakshmi Puja, Saraswati Puja, Manasa Puja, Maghdeshri Puja, Ichamati Puja, Kartik Puja, Shani Puja, Dakini Puja, village deity worship, household deity worship, and Navagraha Puja. Hindu Brahmins performed the priestly duties for these rituals, and animal sacrifices were often offered during these pujas. Additionally, they also revered Muslim saints (Pir Fakirs) and made offerings of "sinni" to them. Among these, the worship of Satya Pir, Manik Pir, and Mirji Pir was particularly popular. Furthermore, they practiced certain customs and rituals that had no connection to Buddhism. (Barua, 1978: 262) I was born in 1967. When I was around 9 or 10 years old, I witnessed the observance of Shani Puja, Kartik Puja, Saraswati Puja, Manasa Puja, and Basumati Puja in my own house and in the Buddhist neighborhoods.

During this period, Buddhist monks were referred to as "Rauli." They had little knowledge of the Vinaya (monastic code). Certain compilations, such as Agar Tara or Akhar Tara, Magha-Khammauja, etc., were recited as part of religious rituals. In the hill districts of Chittagong, there were two types of ascetics known as Ojha and Ganguli, who performed priestly roles in religious activities. The Ojhas conducted various rituals to protect

people from the influence of ghosts, spirits, and other evil forces. The Gangulis, on the other hand, were a type of devotional music performers. The archives of the Chakma royal family contain manuscripts with the following reference to the Gangulis:

Ganguli or singers are found amongst the Chakmas. They roam from village to village singing different....epic, love song, historical etc....After the day is over, as he sits by the fire with his violin in the clear winter nights the village-folk throng round him; he ...commences his songs. (Bessaigned, 1967: 77)

Considering the above-mentioned aspects, scholars believe that in the early nineteenth century, Buddhism in Bangladesh was essentially a “lost religion” or “forgotten creed.” In this regard, the opinion of scholar Haraprasad Shastri is noteworthy. He wrote:

After the Muslim conquest, those who had fallen into disrepute in the new society gradually became entangled in Buddhism, and over time, they forgot wisdom, *upāya*, and the path to enlightenment; they forgot nihilism, rationalism, and the teachings of the scriptures; they forgot philosophy; they forgot ethics and discipline. What remained were a few ignorant monks or monks who were actually married priests. They shaped Buddhism according to their own whims. (Chattopadhyay, 1363-66: 424)

The cause of such a state of Buddhism can be attributed to the oppression of non-Buddhist rulers. During this time, the Buddhist monks were more concerned with saving their lives. As a result, they were unable to carry the heavy scriptures written on palm leaves during their flight. In such circumstances, they performed rituals using the verses they had memorized. Gradually, they forgot the codes of conduct and deviated from the true form of Buddhism. In this regard, Dharmatilak Sthavir wrote:

What they had memorized were the only teachings they could rely on, and the rituals were performed based on what they had learned by heart. As a result, the monks of that time could not grasp the essence of the religion, and over time, they began to forget even what they had memorized. In this way, without understanding the essence of Buddhism, many of the larger

Buddhist communities in the 17th century became influenced by Hindu practices. Simultaneously, Hindu religious leaders began to introduce certain rituals such as Durga Puja and Shitala Puja in the Buddhist communities. As a result, for several years, the larger Buddhist population could no longer be classified strictly as either Hindu or Buddhist. (Sthavir, 1936: 442)

In addition, Tantric Buddhism placed greater emphasis on rituals than on monastic discipline. As a result, due to the social and cultural environment, various Hindu rituals found their way into Tantric Buddhism. Consequently, the religious practices of Hindus and Buddhists became indistinguishable. Observing these rituals, the British believed that no Buddhists resided in Bengal. For this reason, in order to assert their distinct identity separate from Hindus, Buddhist representatives had to make several claims to the British government. (Chowdhury, 1380: 17)

In the early years of British rule, the state of Buddhism was essentially as described above. Although a significant number of Buddhists in Chittagong and the Chittagong Hill Tracts were able to maintain their existence, Buddhism lost its distinct characteristics. Due to religious freedom under British rule and certain subsequent events, an opportunity arose for the reform of Buddhism in Bangladesh and the revival of Theravada Buddhism.

### **The Revival of Theravada Buddhism**

The revival of Theravada Buddhism in Bangladesh was influenced by several key events and processes. The following events played significant roles in this revival: 1. The arrival of Arakanese refugees 2. The establishment of British rule in Arakan and Burma 3. The contribution of Mahamuni Mela or Fair 4. The contributions of Saramedha Mahathera and Queen Kalindi Rani 5. The efforts of monks and lay Buddhists in Bangladesh 6. The role of Buddhist organizations. These topics are discussed below.

### **The Arrival of Arakanese Refugees**

History tells us that in the 18th century, a war took place between Arakan and Burma. During this time, many Arakanese refugees

sought refuge in Chittagong. In this regard, a letter written to Governor General Warren Hastings of Fort William contains the following mention:

I have the pleasure to acquaint you of two thousand people of Arracan having deserted their Country and come to settle in this province. I have therefore allotted them some ground on terms agreeable to the enclosed *Potta*, which with good treatment I hope will induce them to stay and cause more to come as this Province wants much people of the cultivation of the waste land. (Islam, 1978: 73f)

In 1784, the King of Burma conquered Arakan, leading to an increase in the number of refugees. The British government made arrangements for their settlement. In this regard, O' Malley (1899) wrote: Great efforts were made by the East India Company to induce these immigrants to settle down peaceably, and lands were allotted to them in Cox's Bazar. (O. Malley, 1908: 58)

The refugees from Arakan were followers of Theravada Buddhism. Gradually, they developed relationships with the Bengali Buddhists, and the influence of Theravada Buddhism began to spread among the Bengali Buddhists.

### **British Rule in Arakan-Burma**

The King of Burma, Bodawpaya, made a request to the British government to return the refugees. When the British government refused to send them back, it led to a deterioration in Anglo-Burmese relations. As a result, the Anglo-Burmese War broke out. When the Burmese were defeated, the British took control of Arakan in 1826. Gradually, the entire Bengal-Arakan-Burma region came under British rule. With the establishment of British rule in Arakan and Burma, opportunities for communication between the Buddhists of these regions and the Buddhists of Chittagong and the Chittagong Hill Tracts arose. Due to the increased communication, the Theravada Buddhism practiced in Arakan and Burma began to exert influence on the Buddhists of Chittagong and the Chittagong Hill Tracts. As a result, the

Bengali Buddhists started taking steps to reform their own form of Buddhism, drawing inspiration from the Arakanese-Burmese model.

### **The Contribution of Mahamuni Mela or Fair**

The Mahamuni Mela or Fair played an important role for the revival of Theravada Buddhism in Bangladesh. It is known that in the 19th century, Chainga Thakur (also known as Chainga Sthavir) from the village of Pahartali went on a pilgrimage to Arakan and Burma. During his visit to Arakan, he was greatly impressed by the large Mahamuni Buddha statue established in the capital city of Arakan, Mrohang or Mihng. The statue was extremely popular in Arakan and Burma, with the locals believing it possessed spiritual power. Inspired by this, Chainga Sthavir planned to build a similar statue in his own village. It is noteworthy that the Mahamuni statue in Arakan was highly revered, and the locals believed it had spiritual power. Chainga Sthavir brought back a design of the statue and, with the help of the villagers, built a similar statue in 1813. During the inauguration of the statue, a fair was organized, which was named 'Mahamuni Mela' after the name of the statue, and the village was renamed 'Mahamuni Village.' Previously, the place was known as 'Mutsuddir Tila'. From then on, a fair began to be held every year on the 29th of Chaitra. Initially, the fair lasted for a fortnight, but it now lasts for 2 to 3 days. Buddhists in Bangladesh believe that the Mahamuni statue in their village, like the one in Arakan, also possesses spiritual power, and it is believed that wishes made in front of the statue are granted. As a result, the Mahamuni Vihara has gained the status of a pilgrimage site. Every year, Buddhists from various places come to the Mahamuni Mela to offer prayers and tribute to the statue. After the establishment of the Mahamuni statue and fair, there has been a significant increase in religious consciousness among Buddhists, encouraging them to follow the rituals and practices of Theravada Buddhism. In this regard, Sukomal Chaudhury's opinion is noteworthy. He said:

Practically from the period a suitable atmosphere for Theravada Buddhism was created. Sensible persons were inquisitive



enough to know about the original doctrine of the Buddha prevailing in Burma, Sri Lanka and Thailand. So, in one sense, it is the Mahamuni image for which the Arakanese had always been proud of that sets the wheel of Dharma (Dharmacakra) in motion again in Bangladesh in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. (Chaudhuri, 1982: 32)

### **The Contribution of Saramedha Mahathera and Queen Kalindi**

As the influence of Arakan and Burma began to foster the environment for Theravada Buddhism in Bangladesh, Saramedha Mahathera, the Sangharaja of Arakan, arrived in Chittagong and started contributing to the reform of Buddhism in Bangladesh and the establishment of Theravada Buddhism. Saramedha Mahathera first came to Chittagong in 1856, at the invitation of Radhacharan Mahathera (Radhumathe), and stayed for two years. During his stay, he inspired the Barua and Chakma communities, including the monks, to follow Theravada Buddhism and abandon the worship of Hindu and Tantric Buddhist deities. At his request, Buddhist landlords stopped performing the Durga Puja. It is noteworthy that at that time, the Buddhist landlords performed a grand Durga Puja once a year. (Chowdhury, 1956:49)

In the early British period, the Chittagong Hill Tracts were ruled as a feudal kingdom, with Queen Kalindi as the ruler. During this time, the religion followed by the Chakmas was a blend of Tantric Buddhism and Hinduism. Seeing the state of religion, Saramedha Mahathera met Queen Kalindi in 1857 and gave her a religious sermon. After hearing his sermon, Queen Kalindi took steps toward religious reform. In 1857, Queen Kalindi conferred the title of 'Sangharaja Vinayadhara' upon Saramedha Mahathera. Thus, the Chakma people became followers of Theravada Buddhism. In this regard, Risley says:

The Chakmas profess to be Buddhists, but during the last generation or so their practice in matters of religion has been noticeably coloured by contact with the gross Hinduism of Eastern Bengal. This tendency was encouraged by the example

of Raja Dharam Baksh Khan and his wife Kalindi Rani, who observed the Hindu festivals, consulted Hindu astrologers, kept a Chittagong Brahmin to supervise the daily worship of the goddess Kali, and persuaded themselves that they were lineal representatives of the Kshatriya caste. Some years ago, however, a celebrated Phoongyee came over from Arakan after the Raj's death to endeavor to strengthen the cause of Buddhism and to take the Rani to task for her leanings towards idolatry. His efforts are said to have met with some success, and the Rani is believed to have formally proclaimed her adhesion to Buddhism. (Risely, 1892: 172f)

Queen Kalindi played an important role in popularizing Theravada Buddhism. The Buddhists of Chittagong respected her, and as a result, she played a crucial role in the revival and propagation of Theravada Buddhism in the Chittagong and Hill Tract regions. As mentioned earlier, during that time, the Buddhists did not have any religious texts. Queen Kalindi took the initiative to publish religious scriptures. The *Buddha-Ranjika* text is her immortal contribution, which was published in 1890. She also initiated the compilation of the *Agar Tara* collection, which was highly popular among the Chakmas. Additionally, she constructed a monastery in Rangunia Upazila, where she installed a statue similar to the *Mahamuni Buddha* statue. During the inauguration of the monastery and the statue, a fair was organized. For her immense contributions, Queen Kalindi will remain immortal in the history of Buddhism in Bangladesh. (Barua, 1986: 50-51)

In 1864, Saramedha Mahathera returned to Chittagong surrounded by the Sangha and initiated many monks into the Theravada Vinaya tradition. Many monks received ordination under his guidance, while others rejected the idea. Those who were ordained under him became known as the *Sangharaja Nikaya*, and those who refused the ordination became associated with the *Mahasthavira Nikaya*. As a result, the Buddhist monastic community in Bangladesh became divided into two factions: the Sangharaja Nikaya and the Mahasthavira Nikayas. Although the monks of the Mahasthavira Nikaya had received ordination under Saramedha Mahathera,

they, on their own efforts, reorganized the monk's society based on the ideals of Theravada Buddhism. (Bechert, 1967: 21)

### **Efforts of Monks and Lay Buddhists in Bangladesh**

Bengali monks and lay Buddhists also played a significant role in the revival of Theravada Buddhism in various ways. In addition to writing texts, they strengthened the foundation of Theravada Buddhism through religious discussions and the formation of meetings and associations. Among the monks who made important contributions, the following are notable: Chandramohan Mahathera, Jnanlankar Mahasthavira, Kripasharan Mahasthavira, Gunlankar Mahasthavira, Mahasthavira Kali Kumar, Purnananda Mahasthavira, Bhagwan Chandra Mahasthavira, Agramahapandit Dharmavansa Mahasthavira, Prajnalok Mahasthavira, Jnanishwar Mahasthavira, Bangsadip Mahasthavira, Abhayatishya Mahathera, Agrasar Mahasthavira, Prajnananda Mahasthavira, Sumanachar Mahathera, and Dharma Bihari Mahathera. (Barua, 1998: 61)

Among the lay Buddhists who contributed were: Nazir Krishna Chandra Chowdhury, Zamindar Hargovinda Mutsuddi, Pandit Phul Chandra Barua, Pandit Dharmaraj Barua, Sadhu Nabaraj Barua, Poet Sarbananda Barua, Dr. Ramchandra Barua, Birendra Lal Mutsuddi, Dr. Beni Madhab Barua, Dr. Arvind Barua, and Girish Chandra Barua. (Barua, 1998: 61-63)

### **Role of Buddhist Organizations**

During the renaissance of Theravada Buddhism in Bangladesh, many Buddhist organizations were established. In 1897, the Chittagong Buddhist Association was formed with the aim of asserting the identity of the Buddhists in Bengal. Gunameju Mahathera was the president, and Nazir Krishna Chandra Chowdhury served as the general secretary of the association. After its formation, they presented a claim to the British governor to highlight that the Buddhists of Bengal were a distinct community. In 1919, the Buddhist Cooperative Arban Bank was established to alleviate poverty. In 1926, the Ramdhan Smriti Bhandar was set up with the purpose of assisting underprivileged talented students

and supporting those seeking higher education abroad. In 1929, under the initiative of Umesh Chandra Mutsuddi, an organization named Buddhist Samagam was formed. These institutions brought together both monks and lay Buddhists on a common platform. As a result, these organizations played a significant role in laying the foundation for Theravada Buddhism in Bangladesh during the British era.

### **Pakistan and Bangladesh Era**

In 1947, the Indian subcontinent gained independence from British rule and was divided into Pakistan and India. Despite geographical distance and cultural differences, Bangladesh was included in Pakistan due to religious ties. As a result, Buddhists were separated from the cultural and religious hub of Kolkata. During this time, Buddhists felt the need to establish a modern organization. Consequently, in 1949, the Buddhist Culture Promotion Association was formed under the leadership of Umesh Chandra Mutsuddi and Vishuddhananda Mahathera. This organization catered to both lay Buddhists and monks. The association began sending representatives to Buddhist conferences in countries such as India, Nepal, Tibet, Bhutan, and China, thereby establishing connections between the Buddhists of Bengal and the global Buddhist community. One of the significant achievements for Buddhists during the Pakistan era was the establishment of the Dharmarajik Buddhist Vihara in Dhaka under the leadership of Vishuddhananda Mahathera. This institution became an important platform for advocating the rights of Buddhists before the Pakistani government. In 1971, Bangladesh gained independence through a bloody war. After independence, like other religious communities, Buddhists participated in the nation-building process. It is important to note that many Buddhists were martyred during the war. As a result, a significant number of Buddhist children became orphans. Members of the Bangladesh Bauddha Kristy Prachar Sangha established an orphanage at the Dharmarajik Buddhist Vihara to support and provide general, technical, and religious education to these orphans. Additionally, various organizations, along with Bangladesh Bauddha Kristy Prachar Sangha, continued to regularly observe various rituals,

ceremonies, and festivals of Theravada Buddhism, thus solidifying its foundation. On the other hand, the practices of Mahayana and Tantric Buddhism gradually declined.

### Conclusion

A review of the above issue reveals that after the end of the Pala period, Buddhism in Bangladesh suffered a significant decline due to various factors. Key points among these were the persecution and oppression by non-Buddhist rulers, lack of patronage, and cultural changes. After the Pala dynasty, during the reigns of the Varman and Sen Dynasties, Buddhism faced repression rather than patronage. The rulers of these dynasties were narrow-minded and rigid. The lack of patronage, hostility, exploitation, and oppression led Buddhism, its institutions, and its followers into a crisis. On the other hand, under their patronage, Shaivism and Vaishnavism became the state religions. During this period, although Buddhism and Buddhists faced decline, Buddhist monasteries and monks still survived. However, in the 12th century, with the invasion of Turkic warrior Bakhtiyar Khilji and his soldiers, major Buddhist monasteries such as Nalanda, Odantapuri, Vikramashila, Shalban, Sompuri, Jagaddal, and others were destroyed. The monks at these monasteries perished, and countless manuscripts and books stored in the monastery libraries were burned. After the conquest of Bengal, Islam spread rapidly due to forced conversions. During this time, many Buddhists converted to Islam to save their lives, and a significant number of Buddhists fled to the Chittagong and Chittagong Hill Tracts, where they managed to sustain their existence, religion, and culture. Geopolitical influences can be considered one of the main reasons for this. Notably, Chittagong and the Chittagong Hill Tracts remained under the control of Arakanese rulers who followed Buddhism until 1666. In the 17th century, when Chittagong came under full Mughal rule, the areas of Chittagong and the Hill Tracts saw conversions, and mosques and *dargahs* were built in place of Buddhist monasteries. Despite the conversions and hardships, a significant number of Buddhists in Chittagong and the Hill Tracts managed to maintain their existence. However, the religion they practiced was an admixture of Hinduism, Islam, local beliefs, and Tantric Buddhism.

In 1774, the East India Company gained complete control over Bengal, Bihar, and Odisha. The far-sighted British rulers did not interfere directly in religious matters, allowing Buddhists to establish themselves both financially and socially. With the British rule introduced in Arakan-Burma, communication was established between the Buddhists of those regions and the Buddhists in Chittagong and the Hill Tracts. This communication led to the influence of Theravada Buddhism from Arakan and Burma on the Buddhists in Chittagong and the Hill Tracts, prompting the Bengali Buddhists to reform their practices in line with the Buddhist traditions of Arakan-Burma. The form of Theravada Buddhism practiced in Bangladesh today is the result of these reforms.

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