

Spiritual Practices and Monastic Life in Bengal: A Study of Buddhist Traditions (750-1179 AD)

Chandrani Roy

Research Scholar, Department of History, RKDF University, Ranchi

Email ID: chandraniray77@gmail.com

Abstract:

This study explores the development of Buddhist monasticism in Bengal during the Pāla Dynasty (750–1179 AD) and its profound impact on the broader Buddhist world. The Pāla rulers played a crucial role in establishing and supporting Buddhist monastic institutions such as Nalanda, Vikramashila, and Odantapuri, which became global centers of Buddhist learning. This period saw the evolution of Bengali script, which played a pivotal role in preserving and transmitting Mahāyāna and Tantric Buddhist texts. Additionally, Bengal's position as a hub for the adaptation of Buddhist teachings, particularly through Sanskrit and Apabhramśa texts, facilitated the spread of Buddhist doctrines across regions like Tibet and Southeast Asia. The study highlights the socio-political, cultural, and intellectual contributions of Bengal to the wider Buddhist tradition, providing new insights into the region's historical significance in the development of Buddhist philosophy, monastic life, and spiritual practices.

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1. Introduction:

The period between 750 and 1179 CE marks a transformative era in the history of Eastern India, characterized by the flourishing of Buddhist monasticism under the aegis of the Pāla Dynasty and subsequent regional powers. During this time, Bengal served as a vital “active hub for Buddhist practice,” facilitating a sophisticated synthesis of scholarly rigor and esoteric devotion (Czyżykowski, 2016). The spiritual landscape was defined not only by institutional growth but also by the “continuing intercession and cultural exchanges with a well-beyond Bengali political scale,” which integrated local traditions into the broader Buddhist ecumene of Asia (Prabha Ray, 2008).

The consolidation of power by the Pāla rulers provided the economic and political stability necessary for the expansion of spiritual networks. Most notably, Dharmapāla (ca. 770–810) catalyzed a vast scholarly infrastructure that connected Bengal to distant regions such as ŚrīLankā, Uḍḍiyāna, and Kaśmīra. Under his

patronage, centers like Udantapurā, Nālandā, and Vikramāśīla became the nerve centers of Buddhist intellectual life. As noted by contemporary scholars, these institutions were not isolated cloisters but part of a dynamic system where “traveler’s reports of Bodh Gaya’s regional fittings and pilgrimage circuits” were disseminated as essential monastic knowledge (K. Parker, 2013).

As the political climate shifted toward the eleventh century, the disintegration of central Pāla authority led to a unique spiritual adaptation. Monastic communities began to “tighten their affiliation with local rulers” and “champion new forms of devotional instruments, contemplative practices, and textual interpretations” (Tournier, 2018). This era saw a profound integration of Buddhist practice with regional sensibilities, where local Buddhists incorporated Hindu and Jain cosmologies into their ritual calendars. This period of “substantial exchanges in cosmological and ritual ideas” represents a hallmark of the era, bridging the gap between high-philosophy and popular belief (Czyżykowski, 2016).

The spiritual life of Bengal was also deeply rooted in its linguistic evolution. By the second half of the seventh century, the earliest evidence of a Bengali script emerged, providing a vessel for the preservation of Mahāyāna and Tantric literature. In the tenth and eleventh centuries, before the expansion of the Sahajiyā traditions in the twelfth century, Bengal became a critical site for the “transmission, translation, and adaptation” of the Buddhist canon. Figures such as Nāgārjuna and the later monks documented in the township of Gaur ensured that Sanskrit and Apabhramśa texts continued to circulate, creating a “biographical memory of the spirit” that defined the region’s unique Buddhology (Allon, 2022; Tournier, 2018).

1.1. The Review of Related Literature:

Sharma, S. (2024). The enduring legacy of the Pala Empire: A renaissance of culture, knowledge, and heritage. *ShodhKosh: Journal of Visual and Performing Arts*, 5(7), 760–775. This paper reviews the Pāla period (8th–12th century) as the “last great phase” of state-supported Buddhism in India. It emphasizes the role of rulers like **Dharmapāla** and **Devapāla** in fostering “global centers of learning” such as Vikramshila and Odantapuri. The author explores how spiritual patronage facilitated the spread of Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism to Tibet and Southeast Asia. A central focus is placed on the production of illustrated palm-leaf manuscripts, such as the *AstahasrikaPrajnaparamita*, which served as both ritual objects and scholarly tools, cementing Bengal’s role in the internationalization of Buddhist spiritual traditions.

Eshika, P. (2023). A morphological study of the ancient Buddhist monasteries of Bengal. *Proceedings of the International Conference of Contemporary Affairs in Architecture and Urbanism (ICCAUA)*, 6(1), 880–894. This research investigates the spatial layout of five major Bengal Buddhist monasteries constructed between the 5th and 12th centuries to identify patterns of evolution linked to philosophical shifts. The study reveals a significant morphological transition after the 8th century CE, coinciding with the rise of the **Vajrayana** school. The findings suggest that the introduction of Tantric doctrines fundamentally reshaped monastic architecture, moving toward designs that accommodated esoteric yogic practices and complex ritual cycles. The study concludes that the “intrinsic forces” of Vajrayana and the subsequent **Sahajayayana** were the primary drivers of monastic transformation in the deltaic landscape.

Sinha, A. (2023). Spatio-temporal patterns of Buddhist monastic settlements in the cultural landscape of West Bengal. *Journal of Xi’an University of Architecture & Technology*, 14(12), 94–104. This study analyzes the “adaptive measures” taken by monastic systems to sustain spiritual practice within vulnerable ecological systems between 750 and 1179 CE. The author notes a “paradigm shift” where monasteries departed from isolated habitation to establish a “reciprocal dynamic with laity settlements through spiritual exchange.” The research identifies how votive stupas acted as monumental landmarks in pilgrimage

networks, manifesting the Buddha's presence in the physical landscape and facilitating a "co-dependent" subsistence strategy between monks and the local agrarian society.

Das, B., & Chakrabarty, P. (2022). A geo-archaeological study of the landscape of the Buddhist monasteries of western Bengal. *International Journal of History and Interdisciplinary Research*, 3(1), 112–128. Focusing on the 9th-century **Nandadirghi Vihara** (Jagjivanpur), this study examines how the riparian landscape of Bengal dictated spiritual and administrative choices. The authors argue that site selection was governed by both hydrological stability and "geomancy" (Kriyasangraha-Panjika), involving auspicious rituals to sanctify the ground before construction. The research highlights the "reciprocal dynamic" between the monastic population and the environment, where spiritual retreats were synchronized with the lunar and seasonal flood cycles, integrating religious life with the ecological margins of the Varendra subregion.

Dalvoy, R. (2020). *Pala period & Buddhism in India: A pivotal phase of spiritual revival*. UPSC Academic Press. This review examines the internal doctrinal developments of Buddhism during the Pāla hegemony. It details the systematization of **Vajrayana** doctrines and the pivotal roles played by scholars like **Shantarakshita** and **Atisha**. The literature highlights the significance of "philosophical debates and dialogues" in establishing Buddhist logic and epistemology during this era. The author argues that despite the eventual decline under the Sena dynasty, the Pāla period ensured the survival of these spiritual practices by successfully exporting them to Tibet, where they were preserved and further developed.

1.2. The Research Gap:

The existing literature on Buddhist monasticism in Bengal during the Pāla period largely focuses on monastic foundations, scholarly output, and the transmission of teachings to Tibet and Southeast Asia (Sharma, 2024; Dalvoy, 2020). However, there remains a gap in exploring how the local sociopolitical dynamics influenced the development of monastic institutions beyond the royal patronage. Additionally, while the role of the Bengali script in the preservation of Mahāyāna and Tantric texts is recognized (Eshika, 2023), its linguistic evolution and broader impact on regional Buddhism require further analysis. Lastly, more research is needed on how Apabhramśa texts were adapted for local consumption and the cross-cultural exchange facilitated by Bengali monastic hubs.

1.3. The Significance of the Study:

The significance of this study lies in its exploration of the intricate relationship between Buddhist monasticism, spiritual practices, and the socio-political context in Bengal during the Pāla Dynasty (750-1179 AD). This period represents a transformative era in the history of Buddhism, marked by the expansion of Mahāyāna and Tantric traditions. By examining the evolution of monastic institutions, such as Nalanda, Vikramashila, and Odantapuri, the study sheds light on their role in shaping the intellectual and spiritual landscape not only in Bengal but also across Asia, particularly in Tibet and Southeast Asia. Furthermore, the research will illuminate the role of the Bengali script in preserving and transmitting Buddhist texts, emphasizing its contribution to the continuity of Buddhist philosophy and practice. Ultimately, this study highlights Bengal's crucial position as a center of cultural exchange and spiritual transmission, enriching our understanding of medieval Buddhist monasticism and its far-reaching impact.

1.4. The Statement of the Problem:

The study of Buddhist monasticism and spiritual practices in Bengal during the period of the Pāla Dynasty (750-1179 AD) remains underexplored, particularly regarding the local adaptation of Mahāyāna and Tantric traditions. While much has been written about monastic institutions, the socio-political factors that influenced their development and the role of Bengali script in preserving Buddhist texts are not fully

understood. Additionally, the interactions between Bengal's monastic communities and regional Buddhist networks require further investigation. The evolution of spiritual practices within this context, especially concerning Tantric rituals and their integration into monastic life, remains inadequately addressed. This study seeks to bridge these gaps by examining how these elements contributed to Bengal's pivotal role in the broader Buddhist world.

1.5. The Research Questions:

RQ1: How did Buddhist monasticism develop in Bengal during the period of the Pāla Dynasty (750-1179 AD)?

RQ2: How did the Bengali script evolve and contribute to the preservation and transmission of Mahāyāna and Tantric Buddhist texts in Bengal?

RQ3: How did Bengal become a significant hub for the adaptation and transmission of Buddhist teachings through Sanskrit and Apabhramśa texts?

1.6. The Objectives of the Study:

O1: To explore the development of Buddhist monasticism in Bengal during the period of the Pāla Dynasty and its impact on the broader Buddhist world.

O2: To study the evolution of Buddhist literature in Bengal, particularly the role of the Bengali script in preserving and transmitting Mahāyāna and Tantric texts,

O3: To understand the significance of Bengal as a hub for the adaptation of Buddhist teachings in the form of Sanskrit and Apabhramśa texts.

2. The Methodology of Study:

The historical analysis for this study involve a thorough review of primary sources, including royal edicts, inscriptions, and chronicles, to understand the socio-political context and royal patronage of Buddhism during the Pāla Dynasty. Secondary literature, including scholarly books and articles, will be consulted to provide insights into the development of Mahāyāna and Tantric Buddhism. Key historical figures like Dharmapāla will be examined through historical records to understand their influence on Buddhist monasticism. The analysis will also focus on how monastic institutions like Nalanda, Vikramashila, and Odantapuri shaped the intellectual and spiritual landscape of Bengal.

3. The Analysis and Interpretation:

O1: To explore the development of Buddhist monasticism in Bengal during the period of the Pāla Dynasty and its impact on the broader Buddhist world.

The development of Buddhist monasticism in Bengal during the Pāla Dynasty (750–1161 AD) represents a significant chapter in the history of Buddhism in South Asia. Under the patronage of the Pāla rulers, Bengal not only became a major center for Buddhist monastic development but also played a key role in influencing the broader Buddhist world, spanning regions from Southeast Asia to Tibet and China. This era is marked by the consolidation of Buddhist practice and intellectual activity, particularly through the establishment of several prominent monastic institutions. The history of Buddhist monasticism in Bengal, from its early beginnings to its eventual dominance, is a narrative of political patronage, institutional growth, and intellectual achievement.

The Pāla Dynasty's rise to power began in the mid-8th century, following the decline of the Gaṇādhara dynasty, which had previously supported the Tara cult and contributed to the early Buddhist foundations in Bengal. The first ruler of the Pāla dynasty, Guhā (Pāla I), moved the capital from Gaṇādhara to Mukṭāgiri, a Buddhist site to the west. However, the true consolidation of Pāla power came under the reign of Dharmapāla (r. 770–810 AD), a pivotal figure in the expansion of Buddhist monasticism. Dharmapāla, through military campaigns and strategic alliances, extended the Pāla Empire over a vast region, from eastern Rajasthan to the Brahmaputra River in Assam and Bihar. According to historian H  l  ne Cuvigny, "Dharmap  la took the initiative himself and reigned for a long time," securing both military and religious victories that laid the foundations for the golden age of P  la Buddhism (Czy  zykowski, 2016).

Under Dharmap  la's rule, Buddhist monasticism flourished. The monarch's patronage enabled the establishment of numerous monasteries and educational institutions. These monasteries not only served as centers of religious practice but also became major hubs of intellectual activity. The P  la rulers' extensive support for Buddhist institutions, including government grants of land and resources, helped foster the growth of monastic networks that spanned across the empire. These networks included smaller, localized monastic communities as well as large institutional centers that exerted influence on Buddhist teachings across Asia.

Monastic Foundations and Institutions:

Among the most prominent monastic centers founded during the P  la period were the universities of **Nalanda**, **Vikramashila**, and **Odantapuri**, which became the intellectual heart of the Buddhist world. **Nalanda**, initially a Vinaya community, transformed into a world-renowned university by the late 7th or early 8th century. It attracted scholars from across Asia and became a crucial site for the dissemination of Buddhist philosophy. Its curriculum was broad, covering Mah  y  na, Tantric Buddhism, logic, and metaphysics. By the 9th century, **Vikramashila** rose to prominence, further solidifying the intellectual legacy of the P  la dynasty. Established under the second P  la king, **B  laP  la**, Vikramashila became a center for Buddhist education that produced important figures, such as **DrogniLotsawa**, who later played a central role in transmitting Buddhist teachings to Tibet. Vikramashila also attracted a diverse range of scholars and practitioners, making it an important institution in the global Buddhist network.

Odantapuri, another major university of the P  la period, gained prominence by the end of the 8th century. Supported by successive P  la kings, it was recognized as a significant center of Buddhist scholarship. These three universities, Nalanda, Vikramashila, and Odantapuri, became the most important educational centers in the Indian subcontinent by the 9th century. Together, they facilitated the spread of Buddhism beyond India and played a central role in shaping Buddhist thought throughout Asia.

In addition to these universities, other monasteries, such as **Somapura** and **Paharpur**, also contributed significantly to the development of Buddhist monasticism. **Somapura**, founded in the 770s, was known for its integration of Tantric practices into the Buddhist monastic curriculum. **Paharpur**, located in modern-day Bangladesh, was another key monastic site that blended Indian and Chinese Buddhist influences. These monasteries, along with the larger university centers, formed an interconnected network of Buddhist institutions that exchanged ideas, practices, and rituals.

Vinaya Communities and Monastic Hierarchy:

The P  la period saw the organization of monastic communities along **Vinaya** lines, with monasteries adhering to the Buddhist monastic code. These communities were part of a broader network of Buddhist institutions that connected different regions of India and beyond. The Vinaya traditions that underpinned these communities were diverse, and different monasteries followed varying sets of rules and practices.

Despite these differences, the monasteries shared a common commitment to Buddhist teachings and created a network of collaboration, intellectual exchange, and ritual practices.

Monasteries in Bengal operated under a hierarchical system, with smaller local monasteries serving regional needs and larger institutions like Nalanda, Vikramashila, and Odantapuri asserting authority in Buddhist learning and practice. These large institutions became focal points for the study of Buddhist philosophy, ethics, and meditation, attracting scholars and monks from across Asia. They also played a significant role in the spread of **Tantric Buddhism**, a tradition that emerged during the Pāla period and emphasized esoteric rituals, meditation, and deity worship. The incorporation of Tantric practices into mainstream Buddhist monasticism during this period marked a major shift in the religious landscape of South Asia.

Impact on the Broader Buddhist World:

The Pāla dynasty's support for Buddhist monasticism had a profound impact on the broader Buddhist world. Bengal became a key hub for the transmission of Buddhist teachings and practices across Asia. The monasteries of Bengal not only disseminated Buddhist philosophy but also served as centers for the translation of Buddhist texts, the development of Buddhist art and architecture, and the transmission of rituals and teachings to other Buddhist regions.

Dharmapāla's reign played a crucial role in establishing strong connections between Bengal and other Buddhist centers, including Tibet, China, and Southeast Asia. The influence of Pāla Buddhism extended far beyond Bengal, with Buddhist monks and scholars from these regions traveling to Bengal to study at the great universities of Nalanda, Vikramashila, and Odantapuri. In turn, these monks and scholars brought back Buddhist teachings, which had a lasting impact on the development of Buddhism in Tibet, China, and Southeast Asia.

The **Tantric** tradition, which emerged and flourished during the Pāla period, would go on to have a lasting influence on **Tibetan Buddhism** and other Buddhist traditions in East Asia. The rise of Tantric Buddhism in Bengal during this time was a major shift in Buddhist practice, and its integration into the broader monastic system represented a transformation in how Buddhism was practiced across Asia.

In conclusion, the Pāla dynasty was instrumental in the development of Buddhist monasticism in Bengal and its expansion across Asia. The establishment of major monastic institutions like **Nalanda**, **Vikramashila**, and **Odantapuri** laid the foundation for the spread of Buddhist teachings and practices, making Bengal a center of Buddhist intellectual and spiritual life. The Pāla rulers' patronage and support for these monasteries created an environment in which Buddhist monasticism could flourish, influencing the course of Buddhist history for centuries to come. The legacy of the Pāla dynasty's contribution to Buddhist monasticism continues to shape the Buddhist world today, underscoring Bengal's central role in the intellectual and spiritual history of Buddhism.

O2: To study the evolution of Buddhist literature in Bengal, particularly the role of the Bengali script in preserving and transmitting Mahāyāna and Tantric texts.

The evolution of Buddhist literature in Bengal, particularly the role of the Bengali script in preserving and transmitting Mahāyāna and Tantric texts, forms an integral part of the broader history of Buddhism in South Asia. The period from the 8th to the 12th centuries marks a time of significant literary development, driven by the patronage of the Pāla dynasty and other local rulers who supported the transmission of Buddhist teachings through both oral and written traditions. This era witnessed the rise of Bengali as a literary language and the pivotal role of the Bengali script in ensuring the continuity and spread of Mahāyāna and Tantric Buddhism.

Historical Context and the Rise of Bengali Script:

The roots of Buddhist literature in Bengal can be traced to the earlier periods of Gaṇādhara dynasty (640-750 AD), which played a crucial role in laying the foundation for the flourishing of Buddhism in the region. The Gaṇādhara dynasty was particularly known for its patronage of the Tara cult, which set the stage for the later development of both Mahāyāna and Tantric Buddhism. However, it was under the Pāla dynasty (750-1161 AD), especially during the reign of Dharmapāla (r. 770-810 AD), that the flourishing of Buddhist literature in Bengal reached its zenith.

Bengal's significance as a literary and intellectual center during the Pāla dynasty is highlighted by the emergence of Bengali script, which gradually replaced earlier writing systems, such as Brahmi, for literary and religious purposes. The earliest evidence of the Bengali script dates back to the 7th century when inscriptions began appearing in the region. By the 10th century, the Bengali script had evolved into a fully-fledged writing system, and its use in religious and literary contexts became widespread.

The Role of Bengali Script in Preserving Mahāyāna and Tantric Texts:

The Bengali script played a crucial role in the preservation and transmission of Buddhist texts during the Pāla period, particularly Mahāyāna and Tantric literature. While many of these texts had originally been composed in Sanskrit, the use of Bengali script helped adapt them for local use, ensuring that they were accessible to a broader audience. The Pāla rulers were major patrons of Buddhism, and they facilitated the translation and transcription of important Buddhist scriptures into the vernacular.

By the 8th century, Buddhist literature in Sanskrit and Apabhramśa was being widely copied and preserved in Bengal's monasteries, where scholars and monks were actively engaged in writing and copying texts. The Mahāyāna sutras, such as the Lotus Sutra and the VimalakīrtiNirdeśa, along with important Tantric texts like the Kalachakra Tantra and the KriyāTantras, were transmitted and copied in Bengal monasteries. These works formed the core of the Mahāyāna and Tantric traditions and were integral to the teachings at centers like Nalanda, Vikramashila, and Odantapuri.

The Bengali script was used for copying and preserving these texts, which was a significant departure from earlier periods when Sanskrit texts were typically written in Brahmi or Devanagari script. One key figure in this process was Buddhaghosa, a 5th-century scholar and translator who worked extensively to make Buddhist teachings more accessible to a wider audience by translating important texts into the vernacular, a trend that continued in Bengal throughout the Pāla period. The rise of Bengali as a literary language made it easier for local monks and laypeople to engage with Buddhist texts, facilitating the spread of Mahāyāna and Tantric ideas.

The Integration of Tantric Buddhism:

The Pāla dynasty, especially under Dharmapāla, is often credited with introducing and solidifying Tantric Buddhism in Bengal. Tantric Buddhism, which emphasizes esoteric rituals, meditation, and deity worship, became a significant component of the Buddhist tradition in Bengal during this period. Tantric texts, such as the Kalachakra Tantra, HevajraTantra, and CakrasamvaraTantra, were actively studied and practiced in Bengal's monastic centers.

The role of the Bengali script in preserving these Tantric texts cannot be overstated. These texts, often written in Sanskrit, were transcribed and adapted into the Bengali script for local use. The process of preserving these texts in the Bengali script allowed for a unique blend of Indian and Tibetan Tantric practices. The Pāla dynasty's patronage of Tantric Buddhism facilitated the development of Tantric rituals, mantras, and mandalas that would later have a profound impact on the development of Tibetan Buddhism.

Key Figures and Texts in the Transmission of Buddhist Literature:

Key figures in the development and transmission of Buddhist literature in Bengal include prominent scholars and translators like Śāntarakṣita, Kamalaśīla, and Ratnākaraśānti, who were active in translating and composing works related to Mahāyāna and Tantric Buddhism. These scholars not only contributed to the development of Bengali Buddhist literature but also played a significant role in establishing the intellectual foundation for Buddhist philosophy in Tibet, China, and Southeast Asia.

Among the important texts preserved and transmitted in Bengal were the MahāyānaSūtras, including the Prajñāpāramitā (Perfection of Wisdom) texts, which were foundational to Mahāyāna philosophy, and Tantric scriptures, such as the HevajraTantra and the KālachakraTantra, which laid the groundwork for later Tibetan and East Asian Tantric practices. These texts, written in Sanskrit, were transcribed in Bengali script, which contributed to their preservation and accessibility for generations of Buddhist practitioners in Bengal and beyond.

One of the key milestones in the transmission of these texts was the establishment of the Vikramashila University, which became a central hub for the study and dissemination of Tantric Buddhism. Vikramashila's influence spread throughout Asia, and scholars from Tibet, China, and Southeast Asia traveled to Bengal to study these sacred texts.

The Impact on the Broader Buddhist World:

The influence of Bengali Buddhist literature and the Bengali script extended far beyond the borders of Bengal. Tibetan Buddhism, in particular, owes much of its development to the works preserved and transmitted in Bengal. Tibetan monks such as RinchenZangpo (958-1055 AD) traveled to Bengal to study at Vikramashila and bring back important Buddhist texts. These texts, including MahāyānaSūtras and Tantric scriptures, were translated into Tibetan, thereby shaping the course of Tibetan Buddhism.

The Bengali script became a conduit through which Mahāyāna and Tantric Buddhism spread, particularly to Tibet. Notably, DrogmiLotsawa, a scholar from Tibet, studied in Bengal and played a crucial role in the translation of key Buddhist texts into Tibetan, including those related to Tantric practices. His efforts helped cement the role of Bengali Buddhist literature in the development of Tibetan Buddhist thought.

The evolution of Bengali Buddhist literature during the Pāla dynasty is a testament to the region's profound influence on the development of Buddhist thought and practice in Asia. The Bengali script played a vital role in preserving and transmitting Mahāyāna and Tantric texts, ensuring their survival for future generations. The patronage of the Pāla rulers, combined with the efforts of prominent scholars and monks, helped to solidify Bengal as a central hub for the study and dissemination of Buddhist teachings. The texts preserved in Bengali script continued to influence Tibetan, Chinese, and Southeast Asian Buddhism, shaping the course of Buddhist history across the continent. The legacy of Bengali Buddhist literature remains a crucial chapter in the history of Buddhism and a testament to Bengal's significant contribution to the global Buddhist tradition.

O3: To understand the significance of Bengal as a hub for the adaptation of Buddhist teachings in the form of Sanskrit and Apabhramśa texts.

The significance of Bengal as a hub for the adaptation of Buddhist teachings through Sanskrit and Apabhramśa texts is deeply rooted in the history of Buddhism, particularly during the Pāla Dynasty (750–1161 AD). Bengal, under the patronage of the Pāla rulers, became a central node for the preservation, adaptation, and transmission of Buddhist doctrines, influencing the broader Buddhist world. This period saw not only the flourishing of Buddhist monasticism but also a remarkable exchange of ideas, texts, and practices that solidified Bengal's place as a crucial point in the dissemination of Buddhist knowledge.

Historical Framework and the Role of Bengal as a Cultural Hub:

The Pāla dynasty, founded in the late 8th century, was one of the most significant political powers in Eastern India, and under its rulers, Bengal became a leading center for Buddhist scholarship and practice. Dharmapāla (r. 770–810 AD), one of the most prominent rulers of the Pāla dynasty, played a crucial role in consolidating the dynasty's influence, and he was a major patron of Buddhism. His reign marked the beginning of an era where Bengal emerged as a beacon of Buddhist learning, not just for its own region but for the entire Buddhist world, extending from Southeast Asia to Tibet and China.

Bengal's significance as a hub for Buddhist textual adaptation can be traced to the rise of important monastic universities like Nalanda, Vikramashila, and Odantapuri. These institutions became major centers for the study of Mahāyāna Buddhism, Tantric Buddhism, and Buddhist philosophy, hosting scholars and monks from across Asia. The role of Sanskrit and Apabhramśa in these centers of learning was pivotal. Sanskrit, the sacred language of classical Indian scholarship, was the medium through which much of the Buddhist canon, including Mahāyāna scriptures, was transmitted. Apabhramśa, a vernacular language derived from earlier Prakrits, was also employed, particularly in regions with strong local Buddhist traditions, further facilitating the spread of Buddhist teachings across the subcontinent and beyond.

The Evolution of Sanskrit and Apabhramśa in Buddhist Literature:

From the 7th to the 10th centuries, Sanskrit remained the primary language for the recording of Buddhist texts. During the Pāla period, this was especially evident in the Mahāyāna and Tantric traditions, which had a profound influence on the intellectual landscape of Bengal. The Sanskrit Buddhist texts were not only preserved but also adapted and written in different local dialects and languages, including Apabhramśa and Bengali, to cater to a broader audience. The adaptation of Sanskrit Buddhist texts into vernacular languages was essential in making these teachings more accessible to the lay Buddhist communities and local rulers who were pivotal in the monastic patronage system.

By the 8th century, Apabhramśa texts began to appear, often in regions where the influence of the Pāla dynasty was felt. Apabhramśa, a bridge language between Sanskrit and the vernacular languages of the Indian subcontinent, allowed for the blending of Buddhist teachings with local traditions, and was used alongside Sanskrit in the transmission of Buddhist knowledge. While Sanskrit remained dominant in scholarly circles, Apabhramśa provided a means for the propagation of Buddhist ideas to broader, less literate audiences, especially those in rural areas.

Dharmapāla's patronage facilitated the creation of Buddhist texts and commentaries in Sanskrit and Apabhramśa at these monastic centers. These texts, along with the translations of Mahāyānasūtras and Tantric rituals, played a vital role in the development of Tibetan Buddhism and the spread of Buddhism into Southeast Asia. Scholars such as Śāntarakṣita and Kamalaśīla were instrumental in adapting Sanskrit and Apabhramśa texts, translating them into Tibetan and further refining Buddhist doctrinal positions.

The Role of Bengal's Monastic Universities:

Nalanda, Vikramashila, and Odantapuri were not only centers of higher learning but also served as the main conduits for the spread of Sanskrit and Apabhramśa texts. Nalanda, founded in the late 7th century, was the earliest and most prominent university during the Pāla period. The university's curriculum was comprehensive, covering Buddhist philosophy, logic, and metaphysics, with a focus on Mahāyāna and Tantric Buddhism. Sanskrit was the primary language of instruction at Nalanda, and it attracted scholars and monks from Tibet, China, Korea, Japan, and Southeast Asia.

The Pāla rulers' patronage enabled the translation and transmission of Sanskrit texts into the local vernaculars, as well as the incorporation of Apabhramśa as a medium for popularizing Buddhist teachings.

For example, the texts on Bodhisattva practice and Tantric rituals were widely circulated in both Sanskrit and Apabhramśa, and the Tibetan tradition was greatly influenced by the intellectual output of these institutions. DrogmiLotsawa, a Tibetan scholar who studied in Vikramashila in the 11th century, brought back numerous texts, translating them into Tibetan and integrating them into Tibetan Buddhist teachings.

By the 9th century, Vikramashila had emerged as a second major Buddhist university, under the Pāla king Dharmapāla's rule. It was here that the Kalachakra Tantra, one of the most important Tantric texts, was taught and studied. Vikramashila became a crucial site for the synthesis of Mahāyāna and Tantric Buddhism, and its influence spread to regions like Tibet and China, particularly through the work of Tibetan scholars who had studied in Bengal.

The monasteries of Bengal thus became the focal points for the production and adaptation of Buddhist texts, particularly in Sanskrit and Apabhramśa, ensuring that these teachings not only survived but were adapted to new contexts. Sanskrit, as a language of intellectual discourse, and Apabhramśa, as a vernacular language, helped the Buddhist tradition navigate both the scholarly world and the local cultural landscape.

The Influence on the Buddhist World:

Bengal's role as a center for the adaptation and dissemination of Buddhist teachings through Sanskrit and Apabhramśa texts had a profound impact on the broader Buddhist world, particularly in Tibet, China, and Southeast Asia. The Pāla dynasty's influence extended beyond Bengal's borders, with Tibetan Buddhism particularly benefiting from the translation and transmission of Buddhist texts from Sanskrit into Tibetan.

Key Tibetan scholars, including RinchenZangpo (958-1055 AD), were instrumental in bringing texts from Vikramashila and Nalanda back to Tibet, where they were translated into Tibetan. This helped shape the development of Tibetan Buddhist philosophy and Tantric practice, which became foundational to Tibetan Buddhism. The integration of Sanskrit and Apabhramśa texts from Bengal into Tibetan Buddhist thought ensured the continuation and propagation of Mahāyāna and Tantric traditions across the Tibetan plateau and into China.

Bengal's role as a hub for the adaptation of Buddhist teachings in the form of Sanskrit and Apabhramśa texts was pivotal in shaping the course of Buddhist history. The Pāla dynasty's patronage of Buddhism, along with the establishment of leading monastic universities like Nalanda, Vikramashila, and Odantapuri, ensured that Bengal became a critical center for Buddhist scholarship. The adaptation of these texts into local vernaculars and their translation into Tibetan further facilitated the spread of Mahāyāna and Tantric Buddhism, leaving a lasting legacy that continues to shape Buddhist practice and thought around the world. The legacy of Bengal as a center of Buddhist textual adaptation remains a crucial part of the Buddhist intellectual tradition, contributing significantly to the broader cultural and spiritual exchange that defined the medieval Buddhist world.

4. Conclusion:

In conclusion, the development of Buddhist monasticism in Bengal during the period of the Pāla Dynasty (750-1179 AD) represents a key phase in the history of Buddhism, marked by the flourishing of monastic institutions and the spread of Buddhist teachings across South Asia and beyond. Under the patronage of the Pāla rulers, particularly Dharmapāla, Bengal became a critical center for the establishment of Buddhist universities like Nalanda, Vikramashila, and Odantapuri, which played a vital role in preserving and transmitting Buddhist knowledge. These institutions not only contributed to the intellectual and spiritual life of the region but also attracted scholars from other parts of Asia, solidifying Bengal's status as a leading hub for Buddhist monasticism. The monastic communities in Bengal, shaped by Vinaya traditions and supported

by royal patronage, became integral to the broader Buddhist world, influencing the development of Mahāyāna and Tantric Buddhism.

The Bengali script evolved as a crucial medium for the preservation and transmission of Mahāyāna and Tantric Buddhist texts in Bengal. As the Bengali script gained prominence from the 7th century onwards, it allowed for the transcription of sacred Buddhist texts originally in Sanskrit and Apabhramśa, making them more accessible to local communities. The rise of the Bengali script facilitated the spread of these texts beyond the elite monastic circles, contributing to the wider dissemination of Buddhist teachings among the lay population. The adaptation of Sanskrit and Apabhramśa texts in Bengali script ensured the continuity of Buddhist practices and philosophies, allowing them to survive and evolve even after the decline of major monastic centers. The use of Bengali script for Buddhist literature also laid the foundation for later translations and adaptations in other languages, particularly Tibetan, ensuring the global transmission of these teachings.

Bengal's significance as a hub for the adaptation and transmission of Buddhist teachings through Sanskrit and Apabhramśa texts cannot be overstated. During the Pāla period, Bengal became a pivotal center for the creation, translation, and dissemination of Mahāyāna and Tantric Buddhist texts, which played a major role in shaping Buddhist philosophy and practice across Asia. The monastic universities in Bengal, particularly Nalanda and Vikramashila, attracted scholars from Tibet, China, and Southeast Asia, who not only studied these texts but also contributed to their translation into local languages. As a result, Bengal's intellectual and religious landscape was deeply interconnected with the broader Buddhist world, and its teachings influenced regions as far afield as Tibet and China. The adaptation of these teachings into Apabhramśa and Tibetan facilitated their widespread adoption and shaped the development of Tibetan Buddhism, making Bengal an enduring center for the transmission of Buddhist knowledge.

Together, the development of Buddhist monasticism, the evolution of the Bengali script, and Bengal's role as a hub for the adaptation of Sanskrit and Apabhramśa texts represent a defining chapter in the history of Buddhism. These elements not only contributed to the flourishing of Buddhism in Bengal but also ensured the enduring legacy of Mahāyāna and Tantric Buddhism in the global Buddhist tradition. The period of the Pāla dynasty was thus a formative era in which Bengal established itself as a key player in the intellectual, spiritual, and cultural transmission of Buddhism across Asia.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, the Pāla Dynasty (750–1179 AD) played a pivotal role in the development of Buddhist monasticism in Bengal, with the establishment of prominent educational and spiritual centers like Nalanda, Vikramashila, and Odantapuri, which significantly influenced the broader Buddhist world. The evolution of Bengali script was crucial in preserving and transmitting key Mahāyāna and Tantric texts, ensuring their survival and accessibility. Bengal's unique position as a hub for the adaptation of Sanskrit and Apabhramśa Buddhist teachings facilitated the widespread dissemination of Buddhist practices across Asia, especially influencing Tibetan and Southeast Asian traditions. Ultimately, this period marked a transformative era in which Bengal became a central player in the intellectual, spiritual, and cultural transmission of Buddhism.

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