

Chapter - VI

R e l i g i o n .

We have already seen earlier ¹ that the culture and civilization of the Indo-Aryans reached Bengal quite late. There is no mention of Bengal in the Samhitā the Rigveda. The Pundras are referred as Dasyus in the Aitareya Brāhmana ^{1a}. Vaṅgāvagadhā referred in the Aitareya Aranyaka ², in despising terms, really meant ^{the} Vaṅgas and ^{the} Magadhas. It clearly indicates that Bengal was outside the area of Aryan culture even in the later Vedic period. The same feature prevailed even in the Sūtra period. The Baudhāyana Dharma Sūtra ³ prescribed penance for those visiting Pundra and Vaṅga comprising South-East Bengal. The Jaina Āchāraṅga Sūtra describes the people of Rādha as barbarous.

We are not going to treat the gradual expansion of Aryan culture in detail. The study of Videgha Māthava in the Sata patha Brāhmana and the like were the stories of Aryan expansion in the Eastern countries ⁴. The Jaina Prajñāpanā includes the Vaṅgas and Rādhas in the list of Aryan peoples ⁵. It has been referred indirectly in the Divyāvadāna that the Jaina religion was established in Pundra or North Bengal in the time

of Asoka. The first definite evidence of the further progress of Aryan culture towards the east is furnished by the Mahābhārata. In the Mahābhārata, we come across the episode of Paundrakavāsudeva. Devakīputra Vāsudeva Krishna, the great religious preceptor was challenged by the King of the Pundras and Kirātas. He was, however, defeated by Krishna⁶. The Mahābhārata also refers to the places of Pilgrimage in Bengal. The Gangā-Sāgara-Sāngama is referred in connection with the legend of Bhagīratha and the Pilgrimage of Yudhishtira. The rivers like the Karotoyā, Lauhitya were considered as sacred and a dip into these rivers was equal to the virtues of performing an Asvamedha sacrifice⁷. All these indicate that the Aryans had much more intimate contact with Bengal at the time of the Mahābhārata than in the time of the Dharma-sūtras. It has also been indicated that there were powerful states and religious sanctuaries in Bengal which were respected by the Aryans. All these go against the contemptuous references of Bengal in earlier records⁸.

Though the precise date of the Aryan contact is difficult to ascertain, yet it has been suggested that this significant change might have taken place between the ages represented by the Baudhāyana Dharmasūtra and the Mahābhārata.

It may, therefore, be reasonably assumed that the first stage of Aryanisation of Eastern India took place between 4th Century B.C. and 4th Century A.D.⁹

With the spread of the Aryan culture the Vedic religious system was also introduced into the region. It is, however, likely that this system became associated with the prevailing forms of religious beliefs and rituals of the people in spite of the initial resistance by the Vedic seers. It was probably due to the intermarriage between the Aryan males and the Non-Aryan females, the speech and the social and religious life of the Aryan people began changing from early time. Attention may be drawn, for example to the borrowing of the cerebral sounds from the Non-Aryan speech, to the gradual amalgamation of the Rigvedic God Rūdra and the pre-Aryan God Siva-Pasupati and to the germ of theism, a Non-aryan institution later, completely absorbed in Indian religious life¹⁰. The concept of intense devotion and a sense of absolute surrender to the God, the technical name for which is 'bhakti' explained as 'exceptional attachment to God' may be regarded as an un-Aryan concept gradually adopted by the mixed Aryo-Non-Aryan population¹¹.

Thus the Vedic religion itself sustained some changes

by coming in contact with the Non-Aryan culture and it resulted in fusion of the two cultures. In course of time, as observed by R.C. Majumdar, the leaders of the Orthodox religion having observed Vaishnavism and Saivism proceeded to evolve an altogether new pantheon whose history is told and glories sung in a new literature, the Purānas. "These texts, whose number is ever on the increase, now came to forefront and gradually became the principal religious literature of the people at large, in place of the old Vedic Saṁhitās and Brāhmanas"¹².

Brāhmanical religion : The extension of the Vedic civilization in various part of India, which were outside the pale of Vedic culture, is evidenced by the extant epigraphic evidence since the Gupta period. It resulted in the spreading of the Varnāśrama-dharma. The society was compartmentalised into various varnas and the Brāhmanas were provided with the highest position in the society. The inscriptional sources also refer to the construction of temples for various Brāhmanical Gods and permanent endowments were made for defraying expenses of their repair and making provisions for their maintenance¹³. Lands were donated for the settlement of the Brāhmanas in the region full of dense forests apparently

in view of reclamation and extension of agricultural land ¹⁴. The supremacy of the Brāhmanas was not only in the field of religious function, they were also important factors in administration of the village. The involvement of the Brāhmanas in the Local administration is proved by various epigraphic sources ¹⁵.

Hence the entire religious environment was completely controlled by the Brāhmanas almost in the identical manner as elsewhere in Northern India. It was the Gupta administrative unity which brought the whole of Northern India into one cultural unit and furthered the cause of the Brāhmanical religion.

The system of Brāhmanical domination in the religious life continued even after the coming of the Pālas, who were Buddhists. There are abundant references to land donation made to the Brāhmanas versed in the study of the Vedas, Vedāngas, Mīmāṃsā and Vyākarna and capable of performing Vedic sacrifices ¹⁶. According to the author of the work Haricharita, Dharmapāla granted land to Brāhmanas, adept in Vedic studies ¹⁷. In the Khālimpur copper plate of Dharmapāla, Lakshmi, the goddess of fortune has been compared to the line of Dayitavishnu ¹⁸. In the monohyr copper plate ¹⁹ of Devapāla,

Dharmapāla has been described as putting back the misguided castes to their folds. The tradition continued in later times. Lakshmī, Indra, Vishnu, Siva were specially favourite with the Pāla-Chandra rulers. In the Rāmpāla inscription of Śrīchandra, his wife ŚrīKāñchanā has been compared with "Sachī of Indra, Gourī of Siva and Lakshmī of Vishnu"²⁰. Similar comparison from the Brāhmanical myths and Purānic literature has been made in many other Chandra record ²¹.

Thus it is quite clear that being devotees of Buddha, they were not lagging behind in the general culture of the time which was basically flavoured with the Purānic myths. As a result of the influence of the Brāhmanical cults some of the Pāla-Chandra rulers became converts to Hindu worshippers. The Pāla Kings had hereditary Brāhmana ministers and Devapāla's conquests were masterplanned by his minister who unashamedly prided at this ²². Thus the Purānic religion was gaining upperhand even when the royal religion was Buddhism.

The Aryan culture gained much prominence in Bengal in the 11th and 12th Centuries under the patronage of the Varman and Sena Kings. The Bhubanesvar temple inscription of Bhatta Bhavadeva refers to hundred villages as the birth place of Sāvarna gotra Brāhmanas versed in the Vedic lores ²³.

The copper plate of Bhojavarman refers to grant of land in the province of Pundravardhana to Brāhminas who were attached to the studies of the Vedas. It has also been referred in the same Copper plate that the Varmans had the zeal for the three Vedas which are described as the only protection of men (covering the nakedness of men)²⁴. The Varmans particularly Sāmalavarmana is credited to have brought Pāschātya Vaidika Brāhmanas from the west²⁵. The Sena monarchs were staunch adherents to the Vedic and Purānic religion. The names of the Vedic Sākhās like Kauthumi, Asvalāyana, Kānva and Paippalāda are mentioned in the inscriptions of the Sena Kings and Sāmantasena, the founder of the Sena royal family, is called Brahmavādī, who retired in his old age to a hermitage in forests on the banks of the Ganges which were a full of renowned ascetics²⁶.

Thus it is reasonable to think that the revival of the Vedic culture in the Midlands under the Imperial Guptas led to the infiltration of the orthodox vedic culture in Bengal and with the extension of Patronage to such Brāhmanas by the Kings of Bengal, the movement of the Brāhmanas from Midland gathered momentum from the middle of the 7th to 12th Century A.D.

Now the question comes why the Kings patronised the Brāhmanas in this area. The reasons are - (i) aryanisation of Bengal (ii) to preach aryan culture (iii) supporting the royal class by preaching the King as the incarnation of some god himself on earth. The priestly class received generous donation from the rulers as rewards. This resulted in the creation of tax free landed property of the Brāhmanas. We have already noticed that the Brāhmanas played significant part in reclaiming the lands and also introducing newer techniques in the field of agriculture, which was naturally helpful for sustaining growing population. Our records however, does not give us any indication whether there were any tension between the village people on the one hand and the Brāhmanas on the other. But mere silence about this episode in our available record does not preclude the possibility of the existence of such tensions or hostility between the two classes.

In the following pages we seek to present an account of religions and religious ideas with which the rulers of the Minor dynasties were associated. From a careful study of our sources of information it is evident that these rulers were generally the followers of Vaishnavism, Saivism, Śaktism and Buddhism.

It is interesting to note in this connection that in spite of great popularity of solar cult i.e. Worship of Sūrya in different parts of Bengal during our period of study, this could not appeal much to the rulers of minor dynasties under discussion. This is because of their devotion or adherence to the worship of principal forms Brāhmanical religion or Buddhism. We are here inclined to discuss those religions cults only.

Vaishnavism : Vishnu is represented as one of the great Gods in some section of the Rigveda . He was not regarded as the greatest God in the early Vedic times. The Rigveda conceives Vishnu as one of the manifestations of the sun ²⁷. God Vishnu is noted in the Vedic tradition for his exploits of traversing the whole of the universe with three strides ²⁸. He, however, had emerged as the most influential member of the Brāhmanical triad in the epic and purānic periods²⁹. "This Vishnu round whom one of the major Brāhmanical cults grew up, was really a result of the syncretism of three God concepts; the man-God Vāsudeva - Kṛishna, the Vedic sun God Vishnu and the cosmic God Nārāyana of the Brāhmanas" ³⁰

The popularity of the cult of Vishnu has been demonstrated by the discovery of numerous Vishnu images from all over Bengal. The earliest reference to this cult is found

in short record of three lines engraved on the back wall in a hill named Susunia in Bānkurā.

It certainly refers to the dedication of the cave to Chakrasvāmin, i.e. Vishnu³¹. It was probably an inscription of the 4th Century A.D.

Another inscription dated 447-8 A.D. found at Baigrām³² in the Bogrā district refers to a gift of land for the purpose of making an endowment for defraying the expenses of the "repairs of the temple of Lord Govindasvāmin, when damaged or dilapidated and for the performance of the daily worship with perfumery, incense, lamp and flowers".

A Dāmodarpur inscription³³ of the time of Budha Gupta (477-95 A.D.) speaks of the Gods Svetavarāhasvāmin and Kokāmukhasvāmin, both representing the Varāha Avatāra. The temples of these Gods stood on the Himavac - Chikhara (Peak of the Himalayas) apparently at Varāhachhatra (Varāha Kshetra) at the junction of the river Kausikī and Kokā in Nepal³⁴. In the fifth Century A.D., an inhabitant of North Bengal seems to have visited Varāha-Kshetra or Kokāmukha tirtha on pilgrimage and constructed temples for the installation of two deities of the same name near Damodarpur in North Bengal³⁵.

The Gunaighar inscription of the time of Vainya Gupta of the 6th Century A.D. mentions the name of Pradyumnesvara³⁶. The form continued to be popular in the Sena period also when the same form occurs in the Deopārā inscription of Vijayasena³⁷.

Another trace of the worship of the avatāra of Vishnu may be found in the Tippera copper plate of Lokanātha³⁸ in the 7th Century A.D. where Loknātha granted lands, for the temple of Lord Ananta - Nārāyana, in an almost inaccessible forest region in Tippera district.

The Krishna cult is supposed to have formed an important element of Vaishnavism in Bengal as early as the 6th or 7th centuries A.D. Excavation at Pāhārpur unearthed a number of images and the terracottas relating to the life and exploits of Krishna. It includes such scenes as the lifting of the mountain Govardhana, the deaths of Chānura and mushtika in wrestling combat with Krishna and Balarāma, the uprooting of the Arjuna trees and the killing of the demon Kesi³⁹. The most interesting among the sculptured scenes at Pāhārpur is the representation of Krishna engaged intimately with a lady. Some scholars have identified the lady with Rādhā, a very important feature of Bengal Vaishnavism in later years⁴⁰. But this has

been rejected by some others who think that the Rādhā-Krishna cult developed later on and Jayadeva was the chief architect of it.

The same feature of the patronage to Vaishnavism by the rulers prevailed from the 8th Century A.D. The Khālimpur inscription of the time of Dharmapāla⁴¹ tells us about the temple of Nanna-Nārāyaṇa. Nanna was probably the name of the person who had installed the image, a very common and popular custom observed throughout India in the early periods. In the names of the Pāla Kings also we come across Vaishnava influence. Gopāla remained a favourite name among the Pāla rulers, so also Nārāyaṇa, Vigraha, Rāma, Madana etc. This was owing to the close contact between the two religions and Buddha was held as one of the ten avatāra of Vishnu.

The recently published Maināmatī plate⁴² of Ladaha Chandra of the Chandra dynasty proves that owing to the influence of Vaishnavism he, though a member of the Buddhist royal family repudiated the Buddhist faith of his predecessors and granted land in favour of a Vaishnava deity in the name of Vāsudeva - Bhattāraka. Lakshmanasena and his successor, Visvarūpa, show special leaning to the Vaishnavite cult and their inscriptions

begin with the invocation of Nārāyana⁴³. The Belāva copper plate⁴⁴ of the Varman King Bhojavarman containing a seal with the representation of Vishnu's seal at the top, opening with 'Om Siddhih' and with the Vaishnavite genealogy point to the staunch Vaishnavite leanings of the family.

The representation of Vishnu of Garuda in the seal of the Mehār copper plates of Dāmodaradeva⁴⁵ is certainly symbolical of the Vaishnavite faith of the King Dāmodara. The Vaishnavite faith of the royal family to which Dāmodara belonged is evident from his name as well as of his three predecessors. N.G. Majumdar has observed that the dynasty professed the Vaishnava faith like the Varman and the Senas⁴⁶.

From the foregoing discussion, we may form some idea about some special features of Vaishnavism in Bengal during the period of our study. It is evident from epigraphic records that six special forms of Vishnu, viz, Govindasvāmin, Śveta-varāhasvāmin, Kokāmukha-svāmin, Pradymnesvara, Ananta-Nārāyana and Nanna-Nārāyana were worshipped in Bengal. During the Pre-Chaitanya age the chief object of worship was probably Vishnu of whom Krishna might have been regarded as one on the many incarnations. In the Belāva copper plate of Bhojavarma

mention is made of Śrī Krishna ^{who} might have been regarded as one of the many incarnations. In the Belāva copper plate of Bhojavarman mention is made of Śrī Krishna not only as the Mahābhārata-sūtradhara but also as gopi-sata Kelikāra of Śrīmad-bhāgavata although he is still an incarnation and not the supreme deity himself.

It is probable that Vaishṇava bhakti cult emerged after the advent of the Senas in Bengal. Some are of the opinion that the advent of the Karnātas in Bengal with the advent of the Chedi prince Karnadeva introduced the Śrīmad-bhāgavata emotionalism which had its most probable origin in Southern India and it is of much importance that the Senas, who were probably Vaishṇavas, are described in inscriptions as Karnāta Kṣatriya ⁴⁷.

Another complicated problem is the influence of the Pancharātra system on Bengal Vaishṇavism. In this contest the observation of P.C. Bagchi seems to be very reasonable. According to him, "The Vyūha-Vāda which was the central idea of the Pancharātra is absent from the Bhāgavatism of the Guptas which appears as a syncretism of various Vaishṇavite beliefs which came to stay in the country.

It is this Vaishnavism which had found its way to Bengal in the Gupta period and had been firmly established in the Pāla period" ⁴⁸.

Saivism : Siva, associated not only with the act of samhāra (destruction), but also with those of Srishti (creation), sthiti (preservation), anugraha (favour) and tiro-bhava (power of concealment), emerged as a sectarian God almost simultaneously with Vaishnavism round about 4th or 5th Century B.C. Some of the characteristics of Siva were furnished by the non-vedic peoples as early as the Harappan culture ⁴⁹.

According to some scholars, Saivism originated in the east among the Vrātyas or outcastes. But P.C. Bagchi refuted this by stating that it would be unreasonable to think that Saivism originated in Eastern India among the Vrātyas or outcastes who did not conform to the rules of the orthodox Vedic religion ⁵⁰.

The deity was represented in the beginning aniconically but later icons developed. The Linga form of God however continued to be most popular and slowly came to occupy the sanctum cella of the Saivite temple ⁵¹. In the Gupta period Siva became an established deity.

It is learnt from the Damodarpur' copper plate of Buddha Gupta that before the end of the 5th Century A.D. , Siva was worshipped in linga form even in the most inaccessible parts of Northerns Bengal ⁵². The cult of Siva obtained the patronage in Eastern Bengal, for the Gunaighar Grant represents Mahārājā vainyagupta as 'Mahādeva Pādānudhyāta'.

Terracotta lingas have been discovered in the Pāhārpur. Saivism also enjoyed the patronage of Śasānka and Bhāshkarvarman in the 7th Century A.D.

With the advent of the liberal Pāla Kings in the political scene, there occurred liberal attitude in the religio-cultural atmosphere and there was practically no obstacle in the field of Siva and Vishnu worship. The Bodhgayā inscription of Dharmapāla refers to the installation of fourfaced image of Mahādeva in Gayā ⁵³.

The Pāla power received temporary setback, during the rule of Nārāyanapāla (861-916 A.D) by the arrival of the Kambojas. Kuñjaraghaṭāvarsha, a ruler of the Kamboja family, occupied Gauda throne and established a Siva temple at Devikota ⁵⁴, Nārāyanapāla, being a Paramasaugata, patronised the construction of a "Sahasrāyatana" temple of Siva Bhattāraka at Tirubhukti ⁵⁵.

Rājyapāla, the son and successor of Nārāyanapāla, was instrumental in building an enormous Śiva establishment at Brihaddhatta as is evident from the Bhaturiya inscription⁵⁶.

The excavation of Bāngad inscription has thrown much light on the religion of the Pāla Kings⁵⁷. The inscription refers to the stupendous Śaiva establishment in honour of Śaivāchārya Indraśiva at Davikōṭa under the patronage of the King Mahīpāla. According to D.C. Sircar, it appears from the discovery of the plate that Mahīpāla probably inclined towards the Śaiva religion⁵⁸. Nayapāla (1027 - 43 A.D.) and his son Vighrahapāla III (1043 - 70 A.D.), inherited the Śaiva religious tradition. It is evident from the Bāngad Prasasti of Nayapāla that Śaivāchārya Sarvasiva was the 'Guru' of Nayapāla. It may not be wrong to infer from it that Nayapāla was a convert to Śaivism.

The Amgachi inscription of Vighrahapāla III⁵⁹ refers probably to temple of Mahākāla, a popular form of Śaiva temple, at Brāhmaṇīgrāmaṇḍala. The Paschimbhāg copper plate of Srichandra⁶⁰ (925 - 75 A.D.) also refers to the temple of Mahākāla. So it is evident that Mahākāla was one of the popular form of Śiva worshipped in Bengal during the Pāla-Chandra period.

King Govinda Chandra, (1020 - 55 A.D.) the last King of the Chandra probably repudiated Buddhism and became a Śaiva and made his grant in favour of the dancing form of Śiva called Natesvara⁶¹, whose worship might have been popularised in Bengal by the South Indian settlers.

The Sadāsiva image of Śiva is found on the seals of the copper plates of the Sena Kings, such independent figures of the God, representing the description given in the Uttara Kāmikāgama and the Garuda purāna⁶², are found in large number. A specimen of this type of sculpture has been preserved in the Indian Museum, bearing the inscription No. B. The sculpture is finely carved specimen of Pāla art. The image of Natarāja Śiva, one of the important aspects of the God Śiva has been discovered in Bengal. This type of Śiva worship is supposed to have been brought from Southern India.

Umā-Maheśvara aspect is one of the commonest from of images associated with the Śaiva cult found in Eastern India⁶³. The extreme frequency of such images in Eastern India can be explained by the fact ^{that} these are the regions where Tāntric cult, originated and developed to a large extent.

There is another variety of Śiva and Śakti merged in one body, the right half being male and the left female. This is the Archanārīśvara form of Siva which is comparatively rare in Bengal. The purāpārā image of that type is a fine piece of sculpture of the Pāla age ⁶⁴.

The terrific aspects of the God Śiva were also iconographically represented. The four armed image of Vatuka-Bhairava discovered in the Dinajpur district. The image stands in a Pratyālīdha posture on a severed human head ⁶⁵.

Ś a k t i : The worship of the female principle held as the mother Goddess seems to have existed in some form or other among the people of Indus Valley ⁶⁶. Though the vedic seers put more importance to the male deities, they were supposed to have well understood the importance of female energy from very early days. This brought about the creation of such Goddess as Āditi, Ūmā, Prithivī, Vāe besides Sarasvatī, Rātri, Dhishanā and few other Goddess whose glory are sung in the Rigveda ⁶⁷. The Devīmāhātmya section of the Mārkaṇḍeya Purāna contains the most important elements of the Śākta cult ⁶⁸. The devīstutis describe different strands contributed to the growth of the composite cult Goddess. It may be held that the

esoteric tenets of the Śāktas took long time to attain full development and the extant Tāntric texts explaining these doctrines cannot be taken back beyond the early medieval period⁶⁹.

R.P. Chandra⁷⁰ has suggested that Śaktism originated in the Eastern countries of the outer Aryan belt such as Bengal, North Bihar and Gujrat. He even asserted that the Śakti culture was revealed in Gauda. Dr. P.C. Bagchi has refuted this on the ground that "There were mountain Goddesses like Vindyavāsīnī, the vegetation deities like Śākambharī etc., but these did not give rise to Śaktism. The basis of Śaktism was a well-established system of Philosophy like Sāṃkhya in which Prakṛiti and Purusha play the same role as that of the Śakti and Śiva"⁷¹. He traces the origin of Śakti cult directly from of the Śaiva canon.

The Devīpurāna, a text composed about the end of the 7th and the beginning of the 8th Century A.D. shows that she was worshipped in different forms various Devī temples are mentioned in the Pāla records. It is evident from the study of the siyan inscription⁷² that the divine mother in various forms was already popular in Bengal. The Piṅgalāryādevī is mentioned in the verse 63 of the same inscription. These inscriptions

show that the idea of divine mother was quite a popular feature in Bengal.

Ambikā aspect of the Goddess was one of the popular features of the worship of Śakti during the period of our study. In the Vājasaneyī Samhitā ⁷³ and Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa Ambikā appears as the sister of Rudra, but in the Taittirīya Āraṇyaka ⁷⁴, she is known as the consort of the latter. The Brāhma-vaivarta-purāna ⁷⁵ gives a long list of various names of Durgā which includes the name of Ambikā. From the explanations of different texts, it appears that it represented the placid aspect of the Goddess. Among other images of this aspect of the Goddess, the Pāhārpur image of the Goddess Ambikā, with two arms seated in lahitāsana on lotus pedestral, attracts our attention. According to P.K. Bhattacharyya, "the simplicity of the whole composition marks it out as one of the fine specimen of Pāla art (late 10th Century A.D.)" ⁷⁶.

The standing four armed images of the Goddess Pārvatī are very common in eastern India, Particularly in Bengal. Description of some placid aspects of Durgā are found included in the list mentioned in the Prakṛiti-Kāṇḍam of the Brahmavaivarta Purāna ⁷⁷. It is difficult to distinguish one aspect of this class with others, unless the name is written on the pedestal.

All these are the placid aspects of the Durgā images, but the Goddess like her consort Śiva, had her terrific or ugra form. Mythologically, the most important among them is the Mahisāsura - Mardini images. Among the different varieties of Durgā images, the Mahisāsura - Mardini type is the most popular Goddess in India and Bengal in particular, from an early time. The earliest reference to the Goddess Durgā (Durgī) occurs in the Taittiriya Ār-nyaka in which two other names of the Goddess i.e. Kātyāyanī and Kanyā-Kumārī have been added ⁷⁸. The Mārkaṇḍeya Purāna describes in a characteristic way how the Goddess came out of the accumulated fury not only of Brahmā, Vishṇu and Śiva, but also of all other Gods when the Gods were defeated by the Buffalo demon (Mahisāsura) in the initial stage of the rise of the demon ⁷⁹. She is represented in icons with 2, 4, 8, 12, 16, 20 and even 32 hands ⁸⁰. Prabhāvati, the queen of Devakhadga caused the construction of Sarvānī image of eight arms in the 7th Century A.D. A very interesting sculpture with ten armed image of Mahisamardini, discovered at Sakla (Dacca) with a pedestal inscription describing it as 'Śrī-Māsika-Chandī' represents the character of the 12th Century A.D. ⁸¹. The relief of Nava Durgā from Porsha (Dinajpur) represents an extremely rare type consisting of nine figures of Mahisamardini, one represented as the central piece with eight other miniatures grouped round it. The central figure

is eighteen armed while the rest are endowed with sixteen arms⁸².

B u d d h i s m : The predominance of the Brāhmanical culture brought about wrath among the non-Aryan people. The elaborate system of sacrifice associated with the Brāhmanical religion failed to gratify the religious aspirations of all sections of people. This led to religious speculations of a different type and thinkers like the author of the Mundaka - Upanishad⁸³ began to question the value and efficacy of sacrifice

It is difficult to ascertain definitely the first entry of Buddhism in Bengal. According to the Sanskrit work Vinaya which usually preserves the tradition of Pre-Asokan times, the Eastern limit of Āryāvarta was upto Pundravardhana⁸⁴. If it is accepted, then it may be assumed that Buddhism had obtained some footing in North Bengal even before the coming of Asoka to power. The Buddhist canonical work Samyuktanikāya as well as the introduction of the Talapatta Jātaka speak even of Buddha's visit to a locality in the Sum-ha country in South-West Bengal. But the life story of Buddha as recorded in the early Buddhist literature indicates that Buddha's activities were limited to North and South Bihar as well as the Eastern part of Uttar Pradesh⁸⁵.

Whatever it may be, the fact cannot be denied that Buddhism gained firm hold during the time of Asoka (269-232 B.C) who was great champion and propagator of Buddhism ⁸⁶. According to Hiuen-Tsang, Asoka built many Buddhist monasteries in different parts of Bengal ⁸⁷. The Mahāsthān fragmentary stone inscription of the 3rd Century B.C. clearly indicates that Buddhism was firmly established in Pundra-nagara at that time ⁸³. Subsequently Vaṅga became famous as one of the centres of Buddhism. This has been proved by the mention of Vaṅga in a list of Buddhist countries found in Nāgārjunikonda inscription the third Century A.D. ⁸⁹ but the progress of Buddhism in Bengal from the decline of the Mauryas and the rise of the Guptas cannot be determined owing to the paucity of materials.

The Chinese Pilgrim I-tsing who travelled in India in 671-95 A.D. saw the ruins of the 'temple of China' which was built up under the patronage of a King Śrī Gupta about 500 years before his visit. It was built up near Mṛigasikhāvana or Mṛigasthāpana in Varendra (North Bengal) for some Chinese Pilgrims ⁹⁰. It may be supposed that the first Gupta King was devoted to Buddhism. The Bhaikṣuki inscription, preserved in Malda Museum, proves that there were foreign monks residing in Varendra ⁹¹.

The first definite evidence of the prosperity of Buddhism in Bengal is furnished by the accounts of Fa-hien who visited in the first part of the fifth Century A.D. He visited Tāmrālipti, the sea port in the South Bengal where he found Buddhism in flourishing condition. There were 22 monasteries with resident monks and Fa-hien stayed there for two years writing out his Sūtras and drawing picture of images ⁹².

We may form a fairly good idea of the condition of Buddhism in the 7th Century A.D. from the detailed accounts of the Chinese pilgrim Hsuen-Tsang who visited Bengal in about 637 A.D. According to him, there were 20 Buddhist monasteries and above 3000 Brethren in Pundravardhana, and 30 Buddhist monasteries and above 2000 Brethren in Samatata ⁹³. The biggest of the monasteries was the Po-shi-no monastery ⁹⁴ where about 700 monks lived and some of them were distinguished in Eastern India. Cunningham had identified the Po-shi-no Vihāra with a site called Bhasuvihara near Mahāsthān in Bogrā ⁹⁵.

The Chinese pilgrim Sheng-chi, who visited India in the second half of the 7th Century A.D., has left a valuable account of the state of Buddhism in Samatata. According to him, the King of the country at that time was Rājabhata who was a devoted worshipper of triratna and played the part of a great

Upāsaka. He used to read hundred thousand ślokas of Mahāprajñā-
paramitāsūtra and there were more than 4000 monks and nuns in
Samatata at that time ⁹⁶. The King Rājarāja belonged to the
Khadga dynasty of Samatata in second half of the 7th Century A.D.

The Chinese accounts undoubtedly prove that Tāmrāipti
was an important centre of Buddhist studies and Buddhism was in
a flourishing condition all over Bengal at least in the seventh
Century A.D.

The Kingly house that took up the reins of political
control in Bengal was the house of the Palās. It ruled for four
hundred years over Bengal and Bihar. The above discussion proves
that the establishment of the Buddhist Pāla dynasty in Bengal
about the middle of the 8th Century A.D., may not be a fortu-
itous event, but was facilitated by the growing dominance of
Buddhism in this region. The rule of the Pālas saw the heyday
of Buddhism, but Buddhism declined and ultimately disappeared
from Bengal after them and wherever it remained it changed
its basic characteristics.

It may be mentioned here that the Goddess Tārā appears
to have been originally worshipped by some aboriginal people
probably of Eastern India and was adopted in both the

Brāhmanical and Buddhist pantheons in the early centuries of the Christian era ⁹⁷.

Among other monasteries, flourished during that time, mention may be made of the Traikūṭaka, Devīkota, Panditā, Sannagara, Phullahari, Pattikeraka, Vikramapurī and Jagaddala. The royal patronage has always been an important factor in the growth of religious sects into importance and Bengal enjoyed it to the full during the period between 750 - 1150 A.D. Not only the Pālas, but even the minor ruling dynasties during the period were ardent followers of Buddhism ⁹⁸.

It appears from the study of the inscriptional sources that many of the Buddhist and Jaina religious establishments were patronised by the Brāhmanical Hindus and that the Buddhists and Jains were not socially distinct from the ordinary Hindus. It is recorded in Pāhārpur inscription of 479 A.D. that a Brāhmana named Nāthasarman and his wife Rāmi donated land for Jain monastery ⁹⁹. It has been recorded in the Gunaighar grant that a Buddhist monastery was made by a Śaiva King ¹⁰⁰. It has been informed in the kailan inscription ¹⁰¹, of a Vaiṣṇava King Śrīdhāranarāta, that a piece of land was donated to Bhāgavat Tathāgata or Ratna traya (Buddhist trinity of Buddha,

Dharma and Saṅgha) for the reading and writing of Buddhist religions texts as well as to a number of Brāhmanas for the performance of their Pañca-mahāyañja. It appears from the fact noted above that "in the 7th Century A.D. when the Brāhmanical and Buddhist philosophers were busy in refuting one another's view, the life of the ordinary man was marked by absolute toleration " 102.

The royal family of the Chandras of South-East Bengal adopted Buddhism. The Kings of the dynasty were called Parama-Saugata. The grants of Sri-chandra were made in the name of the Buddha-bhattāraka 103. The recently published Maināmati plates 104 of Ladaha Chandra (1000-20) and Govinda Chandra (1020 - 55 A.D.), however, show that the latest members of the Chandra family repudiated the Buddhist faith and they made grants of land in favour of a Vaishnavite or Saivite diety. Ladaha Chandra's gifts were made in favour of the Vaishnavite God Ladahamādhava bhattāraka installed by and named after himself 105. Govindachandra made his grant in favour of the dancing from of Siva called Natesvara 106.

The Bhagalpur plate of the Parama-Saugata Nārāyaṇa-pāla (854 - 908 A.D.) records the gift of a village in favour

of the temple of Sīva-bhaṭṭāraka and the Pāsūpatāchārya Parisad in a locality of Kalasapta¹⁰⁷. This inscriptions appears to indicate a sort of reproachment between Saivism and Buddhism.

The reproachment between Vaiṣṇavism and Buddhism is traced in Vajrayogini tortoise shell inscription of the Varman King Sāmalavarman of the 11th Century A.D. It has been described "Namo Bhagavate Vāsudevāya / Namō Budhāya // Savastinireyasāy = āstujino Jinānām " = "Adoration to the Buddha. May the Jina (Buddha) be for the prosperity and salvation "¹⁰⁸.

The Nārāyanapur inscription of the time of Mahīpāla I (988 - 1088 A.D.) indicates a sort of merger of the Buddhists in the Hindu community¹⁰⁹. The above view has also been supported by the Mandhuk inscription¹¹⁰. According to the Mandhuk inscription, a merchant named Buddhāmītra who was the son of Jambhāmītra of Samatata caused the establishment of an image Vināyaka Brāhmanical God. This fact seems to indicate that Buddhāmītra and Jambhāmītra were Buddhists, but were Hinduised enough to pay homage to the Brāhmanical deity or that their family had been Buddhist at an earlier date, although they were themselves followers of the Brāhmanical faith¹¹¹.

The ordinary Buddhist house holders had perhaps no real touch with the Buddhist philosophers. The Mahāyāna Buddhists worshipped icons quite similar to that ^{of} Brāhmanical Gods and Goddesses. This might have wiped away gradually the barriers between the two religions. According to D.C. Sircar, "In the early medieval age, Buddhists appear to have been joining the worship of Brāhmanical deities and social and religious festivals of the Hindus and were enjoying recitations, on such occasions, of stories from Brāhmanical literature alongwith their Hindu neighbours who adopted wholly or partly some Buddhist deities including the Buddha himself and certain Buddhist social and religious festival" ¹¹². The old Mahāyāna form of Buddhism was transferred into mystic forms known as Vajrayāna and Tantrayāna, more specifically Sahajayāna and Kālachakrayāna. Much of the religious concepts of these sects were adopted by the Tāntrika school and various other religion communities of the Hindus ¹¹³. This led to the ultimate decline of Buddhism in Bengal.

Another contributing factor was the rise of Senas who were the followers of orthodox Brāhmanical religion and due to the absence of royal patronage Buddhism lost its importance in Bengal which had been its last refuge. Another important blow was the indirect economic disability produced by the

arrival in Bengal of invading Muslim troops covering off the land, thus rendering popular economic support of the Saṅgha impossible to maintain. Once the critical situation had been reached all the forces detrimental to the survival of Buddhism would have been brought into play. Loss of popular support because of economic shortage denied to the Saṅgha the chance of being popularly maintained ¹¹⁴ .

The Pālas advocated a policy of compromise in social and cultural spheres with Brāhmanical Hinduism for political and diplomatic reasons. The Senas tried to build up the Society on the basis of rigidity of caste system resulting the decline of the policy of compromise with different religious sects pursued by the Pālas. According to M.R. Tarafdar the excessive dependence upon agriculture and the neglect of trade during that time and the consequent derogation of the position industrial and Business class who were the mainstay of Buddhism, sounded the death knell of Buddhism in Bengal ¹¹⁵ .

C o n c l u s i o n : From the foregoing discussion we may discern certain striking features of religious system in Bengal down to the end of Hindu rule. One of the most significant feature was the importance of Buddhism in Bengal. On the basis of the evidence of Hiuen-Tsang we may assume that

Buddhists and Jainas almost out numbered the followers of the Brāhmanical religion. The Patronage of the Khadgas, Pālas, Chandras, Kāntideva saved that religion from the fate which occurred to it in other parts of India. But all these could not curb the dominance of the Brāhmanical religion inspite of the royal patronage in favour of Buddhism.

Another important feature was the absence of sectarian jealousy among the followers of different creeds. The Catholic attitude of the Buddhist rulers may be cited for example. Some of the Buddhist rulers are given credit in official records for maintaining orthodox social order. Some of rulers built various temples of Śiva and Vishnu and reverently poured sacrificial water upon their head. Prabhavāti, the queen of Devakhadga, set up the image of Chandī. Chitramatikā, the Chief queen of Madanapāla regarded it meritorious to hear the recital of the Mahābhārata. One of the reasons may be that the royal families of Bengal often sought matrimonial relations with the important Brāhmanical royal families like the Rāshtrakūtas, the Kalachuris etc. The religion of the queens influenced the religions lives of Kings of Bengal very often. Another important factor, as assessed by some, may be due to the political necessity rather than to a firm religious conviction ¹¹⁶.

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