



Buddhism in Bengal and Assam: Decline and Transformation

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ABSTRACT

Buddhism in Bengal and Assam experienced a dynamic trajectory marked by flourishing, decline, and eventual transformation within diverse socio-political and cultural contexts. Emerging as a powerful spiritual and philosophical movement between the 3rd century BCE and the 12th century CE, Buddhism thrived under royal patronage and widespread monastic networks. In Bengal, centers such as Paharpur, Mainamati, and Jagaddal became renowned hubs of Mahayana and Vajrayana traditions, reflecting a rich synthesis of art, education, and mysticism. Similarly, Assam witnessed the spread of tantric Buddhism, closely interacting with local tribal and Brahmanical traditions. However, the decline began with shifting political allegiances, the resurgence of Hinduism, and the rise of Islamic influence after the 12th century. Rather than disappearing entirely, Buddhism adapted and merged with regional beliefs, leaving enduring imprints on folklore, rituals, and local religious practices. This transformation reveals the resilience of Buddhist thought and its ability to evolve amid changing historical circumstances. The study of Buddhism's decline and transformation in Bengal and Assam thus provides crucial insights into cultural syncretism, identity formation, and the fluidity of religious traditions in Eastern India.



Introduction

Buddhism's role in the early medieval socio-political and cultural landscapes of Bengal and Assam was significant, particularly during the rule of the Pala dynasty in Bengal and the early centuries of the Kamarupa kingdom in Assam. While Buddhism influenced various aspects of life—ranging from religious practices to statecraft and art—its eventual decline, particularly in Bengal, was marked by the rise of Hinduism and changing political dynamics. The Pala dynasty (8th to 12th centuries) was instrumental in fostering the spread and growth of Buddhism in Bengal. Under Pala rulers like Dharmapala and Devapala, the region became a major center for Mahayana Buddhism, and the Palas were strong patrons of Buddhist monasteries, universities, and scholars. “Probably Buddhism was on a decline after Devapala”¹ The monastic complexes at Nalanda and Vikramashila attracted scholars from across South and Central Asia. These centers were not only religious hubs but also influential in the development of Buddhist thought, philosophy, and education. The Nalanda University, in particular, became a beacon of intellectual activity, with Buddhist scholars contributing significantly to fields such as logic, medicine, and astronomy. Bengal's Buddhist influence extended to architecture, art, and culture, with Buddhist stupas, viharas, and sculptures becoming integral parts of the region's cultural heritage. The rise of the Sena dynasty in the 11th century marked a pivotal shift in Bengal's religious landscape. The Senas, particularly under Vijay Sena, promoted Brahmanical Hinduism, focusing on the worship of gods such as Shiva and Vishnu, and thereby sidelined Buddhism. As Hinduism gained prominence, Buddhist institutions were either abandoned, destroyed, or repurposed for Hindu use. The Buddhist universities at Nalanda and Vikramashila, once thriving centers of learning, began to lose royal patronage, which ultimately contributed to their decline. By the 12th century, the Muslim invasions further hastened the decline of Buddhism in Bengal. “There was hardly any trace of Buddhist practices and heritage in the medieval period when Bengal was ruled by the Muslim rulers and Assam by the Ahoms.”² The destruction of Buddhist monasteries during the Delhi Sultanate's expansion effectively ended the presence of institutional Buddhism in the region. Despite its decline, the cultural and intellectual legacy of Buddhism persisted in Bengal, with many ideas and artistic traditions influencing the later development of Bengali culture. The Mahayana Buddhist traditions, including Tantric practices, influenced Hinduism, especially in the context of worshiping goddesses and in the Bhakti movement. The idea of devotion to a personal deity, which became central to the Vaishnava Bhakti movement in Bengal, has roots in the Buddhist devotional practices that emerged during the early medieval period. During the early medieval period, Buddhism also had a foothold in Assam, especially during the Kamarupa kingdom's early centuries. The kingdom was located at the crossroads of cultural exchanges,



and Buddhist missionaries and monastic centers spread their influence through Assam, particularly in the upper Brahmaputra valley. Assam's Buddhist history is not as well-documented as Bengal's, but there is evidence that the region saw the establishment of Buddhist stupas, viharas, and monasteries, particularly during the reign of the Varman dynasty in Assam. Some sources suggest the existence of significant Buddhist communities in the Assamese region prior to the rise of Hindu dominance. Similar to Bengal, the rise of Hinduism in Assam, particularly Shaivism, led to the decline of Buddhism. As the Kamarupa kingdom began to integrate Brahmanical practices into its royal policies, Brahmins were employed as priests and administrators, while indigenous tribal deities and Shiva worship gained more prominence. The blending of Hinduism with local beliefs and the increasing patronage of Shaivism and Shakti worship eventually led to the decline of institutional Buddhism, which was overshadowed by the growing influence of Brahmanical Hinduism. Even though Buddhism lost its dominance in Assam, its cultural impact remained. The Buddhist influence on art, particularly stone carving and sculptures, is still visible in the region's temple architecture. Additionally, the concept of devotional worship, which became central to the Bhakti movement later in Assam, can be traced back to the influence of Buddhist devotional practices. The decline of Buddhism in both Bengal and Assam was shaped by a combination of political, religious, and cultural factors. While Buddhism had a significant presence and influence during the early medieval period, the rise of Hinduism, particularly under the Sena dynasty in Bengal and the Kamarupa kingdom in Assam, eventually overshadowed it. The growing prominence of Shaivism, Vaishnavism, and the Bhakti movement led to a gradual decline in Buddhist patronage, particularly with the emergence of Brahmanical Hinduism. Nevertheless, Buddhism's legacy in both regions is not entirely lost. Its influence can be seen in the artistic traditions, the development of devotional practices, and the broader cultural transformation that shaped Hinduism in Bengal and Assam. While Buddhism may have faded as the dominant religious force, its intellectual, artistic, and philosophical contributions continued to impact the religious and cultural landscape of both Bengal and Assam.

Buddhism's golden age in Bengal during the Pala dynasty (750–1161 CE) marked a significant period of cultural, intellectual, and religious development, with Mahayana Buddhism at the forefront. The Palas were strong patrons of Buddhism, and their support helped establish Bengal as a major center for Buddhist learning and influence. Key Buddhist institutions such as Nalanda University and Vikramashila University became thriving hubs for scholars, monks, and intellectuals. These centers were instrumental in the dissemination of Buddhist philosophy, particularly Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism, which emphasized complex ritualistic practices and a range of esoteric teachings. During the Pala period, Nalanda, the renowned monastic university, reached its peak, becoming a global center for Buddhist



learning. Students from as far as China, Tibet, and Southeast Asia came to study Buddhist scriptures, logic, and philosophy. Nalanda became a beacon of intellectual activity, fostering a deep connection between Buddhist teachings and secular knowledge, including medicine, astronomy, and mathematics. Founded by Dharmapala, the most celebrated Pala ruler, Vikramashila also rose to prominence as an important center for Buddhist studies, particularly in Mahayana and Tantric Buddhism. Vikramashila's focus on Vajrayana Buddhism was crucial in preserving esoteric Buddhist practices and deepening the understanding of Tantric rituals. The Palas also patronized the construction of Buddhist monasteries, temples, and stupas, which were not only religious centers but also symbols of the Pala dynasty's political and cultural power. Buddhist art, especially the iconic sculptures and paintings, flourished during this period, influencing other regions of South Asia and Southeast Asia. The Sena dynasty, which rose to power in Bengal during the 11th century, brought a drastic change in the region's religious dynamics. The Senas were staunch Hindus, and their policies were a sharp contrast to those of the Palas. The Senas were strong proponents of Brahmanical Hinduism, and under their rule, there was a deliberate effort to promote Shaivism, Vaishnavism, and other forms of Brahmanical practices. "With the revival of Vedic Hinduism in the form of Vaishnavism, Bhagavatism and Shaivism, Buddhism somewhat lost its relevance as a separate faith but continued to thrive and prosper."³ The Senas built numerous Hindu temples and patronized Brahmin scholars, thus signaling a shift away from Buddhist traditions. With the rise of Hinduism under the Senas, the once powerful Buddhist monasteries lost their royal patronage. Nalanda University and Vikramashila University, which had thrived under the Palas, saw a decline in support and resources, and gradually lost their intellectual prominence. The monasteries, which had been centers of not just religious practice but also education, medicine, and culture, began to fade in significance as the political power shifted to Brahmanical institutions. The Sena dynasty's promotion of Hinduism led to the weakening of Buddhist economic and political influence. Brahmin land grants and the growing influence of Hindu temples undermined the economic base of Buddhist institutions, causing many monasteries to close or lose their land holdings. The decline in Buddhist patronage, coupled with the loss of political support, resulted in a general recession of Buddhism in Bengal. The Muslim invasions during the late 12th and early 13th centuries, particularly the raids by Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khilji, further accelerated the decline of Buddhism in Bengal. "Buddhism appears to have fallen into a state of complete disarray in the plains of India ... it collapsed rather quickly and comprehensively towards the end of the twelfth century."⁴ The invasions not only destroyed many Buddhist monasteries but also disrupted the intellectual and religious landscape that had been cultivated over centuries. The Islamic conquest led to the eventual displacement of Buddhism as a dominant religious force in Bengal.



“Later, as a result of Muslim invasions in North Bengal, the religion gradually became extinct.”⁵ By the 14th century, Hinduism had firmly established itself as the dominant religion in Bengal, and Buddhism had largely receded from public life. Although Buddhist practices and influences continued to exist in some regions, particularly in rural areas, Bengal's religious landscape had been irrevocably transformed by the combined influence of Hinduism, the Sena dynasty, and the Muslim invasions. Despite its decline, the legacy of Buddhism left a lasting impact on Bengal and the broader Indian subcontinent: The Buddhist monastic centers such as Nalanda and Vikramashila contributed immensely to the intellectual heritage of South Asia. The Mahayanist and Tantric practices developed in Bengal influenced various regions, particularly Tibet, China, and Southeast Asia. Artistic Contributions: Buddhist art from Bengal influenced the sculptural traditions of Southeast Asia, and the iconography developed during this period continued to shape religious art for centuries. The Buddhist schools of thought, particularly in logic and metaphysics, had a lasting effect on both Hindu philosophy and later Buddhist traditions in Asia. In conclusion, the decline of Buddhism in Bengal during the early medieval period was a complex process driven by the rise of Hinduism under the Sena dynasty, changes in political patronage, and external factors like Muslim invasions. Although Buddhism eventually receded from Bengal's religious and intellectual center stage, its cultural, intellectual, and artistic influence continued to shape the region's development for centuries.

In Assam, Buddhism had a more subdued presence compared to Bengal during the early medieval period. While it was not as central to the region's political or cultural life, especially when compared to the rise of Shaivism and Brahmanical Hinduism, Buddhism nonetheless made its mark in various ways. The Kamarupa kingdom, which flourished from the 6th to the 12th century, was predominantly a center of Shaivism, but evidence suggests that Buddhism was not entirely absent. There were Buddhist monasteries and Buddhist practices present, particularly in the earlier medieval period, before Hinduism gained prominence. The region was influenced by the broader Buddhist culture of India and its neighbors, particularly Bengal, and there were interactions between the Brahmanical and Buddhist traditions. The presence of Buddhist monasteries in Assam is indicated by archaeological findings, particularly in the Kamrup and Lower Assam regions. Some Buddhist influences can also be seen in the art and architecture of the period, especially in sculptures that exhibit features of Buddhist iconography and architectural styles that were influenced by Buddhist monasteries across India and Southeast Asia. The political landscape of Assam was heavily influenced by Shaivism, which had deep roots in the Kamarupa kingdom. “Buddhism contributed to the region's cultural and intellectual landscape, leaving behind architectural remnants such as the ruins of ancient stupas and monasteries, and playing a role in



the cross-cultural exchanges between Assam and its neighbouring regions.”⁶ The kings of Assam, much like their counterparts in Bengal, were patrons of Hinduism, particularly Shaivism and Shaktism. Over time, Brahmanical practices began to outpace the influence of Buddhism, and Hinduism became the dominant religion in the region. Shiva worship, along with local deities, became firmly entrenched in the cultural and religious fabric of Assam, overshadowing the once-present Buddhist traditions. Despite the decline of Buddhism, many Buddhist traditions were not completely wiped out. Instead, some aspects of Buddhist practices, including certain rituals, art forms, and architectural styles, were assimilated into the broader Hindu tradition. For example, certain Buddhist symbols and iconography can still be seen in the art of Assam, where Hindu gods and goddesses were often depicted using a style influenced by earlier Buddhist art. The most visible legacy of Buddhism in Assam can be found in its art and architecture. Some Buddhist structures, such as stupas and viharas, can still be found in parts of Assam, though they were often repurposed for Hindu worship. Buddhist motifs, like the lotus or wheel (representing the Dharmachakra), continued to be used in Hindu art. The influence of Buddhist sculpture can also be seen in the bronze and stone carvings of later Hindu temples. Assam became a region where Hinduism and Buddhism coexisted, albeit in a fluid manner. Local tribal religions and shamanistic traditions also played a significant role in shaping the region’s religious landscape. Buddhist ideas of compassion, karma, and rebirth were sometimes absorbed into the Hindu religious framework, particularly through the medium of Bhakti movements that emphasized personal devotion. While Buddhism may not have been the predominant faith in Assam, the influence of the region's monastic traditions and pilgrimage sites had lasting significance, especially as it linked Assam with broader South Asian religious and cultural currents. The Kamakhya Temple, a Shakti temple dedicated to the goddess Kamakhya, became one of the most important pilgrimage sites in Assam and the wider Indo-Tibetan region. While Kamakhya itself is a Hindu deity, the temple’s architecture and its symbolic elements show some influence of earlier Buddhist styles. This syncretism reflects the co-existence of Hinduism and Buddhism, even as the latter’s prominence waned. In contrast to Bengal, where Buddhism experienced a golden age under the Palas and later declined with the rise of Hinduism under the Senas, Assam's experience was more one of integration and gradual transition. Buddhism was never as central to Assam’s political and cultural identity as it was in Bengal but still played a role in shaping the region’s early medieval religious environment. Over time, Shaivism and Brahmanical Hinduism overshadowed Buddhism, but the legacy of Buddhist traditions, particularly in art, architecture, and certain rituals, remained a part of Assam's cultural fabric, influencing the region’s Hindu traditions and artistic expression. Thus, while Buddhism gradually declined in Assam, its cultural and intellectual influence persisted, contributing to the region's rich religious syncretism.



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