Aryan Religious Traditions in Bengal from Gupta through Sena Periods: An Introductory Note

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1

Abstract. Due to scant historical evidence the extent and character of the early Aryan socio-cultural presence in Bengal, scholars are not sure about the details of religions that prevailed there prior to the Gupta period. There are, however, numerous evidences of diverse elite Aryan religious cults—Brahmanic, Buddhist and Jaina—in Bengal from the Gupta period onward. During the administration of the Palas, which extended about four hundred years (750 to 1155 A.D.), multiple definite religious systems were established in Bengal. The Senas in the latter twelfth century A.D., however, seem to have patronized Brahmanic religion exclusively.

Religious Pluralism from Gupta through Pala Periods in Bengal

Vaishnavism, as a part of Sanatana Dharma, was in practice in Bengal. The Krishna-legend seems to have formed an essential element of Vaishnavism in Bengal as early, at least, as the sixth or seventh century A.D. In this regard sculptures of Paharpur illustrate various incidents from the life of Krishna such as uprooting the twin *arjuna* trees and killing the demon Keshin. Incidents of the early life of Krishna at Gokula are also depicted. The Krishna-legend was highly popular and the Krishna cult had a special hold in Bengal by the seventh century A.D. From the eighth century onwards development of Vaishnavism in Bengal is proved by a large number of epigraphic records. Vaishnavism in Bengal probably made a contribution to the systemization of the theory of *avatara*, or divine descent. Bengal Vaishnavism also included the Radha-Krishna cult.

Saivism

Saivism, represented in the inscriptions of the Guptas, continued to be prevalent in the Pala period. The Pala and Sena inscriptions both contain references to the worship of Siva. For instance, there is mention of the installation of a four-faced image of Mahadeva during the reign of Dharma Pala. Probably Saktism had some sort of relation with Saivaism during the period of Pala rulers in Bengal.

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Other Brahmanic Sects

Brahmanism in Bengal would remain incomplete without reference to some gods and goddesses whose sculptural representations are found in the region. The images of gods such as Kartikeya, Ganesa, Indra, Agni, Kuvera, Brihaspati etc. were found in Bengal. According to *Rajatarangini* there was a temple of Kartikeya at Pundravardhana in the eighth century A.D., which presupposes his worship there in early time. Two other gods, Surya and his son Revanta, however, enjoyed special favour in ancient Bengal. The number of images of this sun god dating from the Pala period is very large.

The Pala emperors were mostly Buddhists by faith, but in practices they were not hostile to other forms of religion especially to Hindu religion. In the Pala period the Vedic culture of the Sanatana Dharma gathered strength in Bengal. Inscriptions of the Pala period contain abundant references to grants made to Brahmans versed in the study of Vedas, Vedangas, Mimamsa and Vyakarana. The author of *Haricharita* refers to grants made by Dharmapala to Brahmans adept in Vedic studies. These evidences, as a sample. show the existence of Brahamanical religion in Bengal.

Buddhism

The Pala Emperors were the followers of Buddhism. They call themselves *parama-saugatas* and the Buddha is regularly invoked at the beginning of their official records. During the four centuries of Pala rule, Bengal and Bihar remained strongholds of Buddhism. However, we are not going into Buddhism in details as this is covered by Professor Chakma in his essay.

Jainism

Jainism, like Buddhism, originated in Eastern India. Mahavira, one of the great tirthankars, or gurus, in the Jaina tradition, visited western Bengal. There are frequent references to Vanga in the Jaina canon. The earlier name of Jainas was Nirgranthas. It was by this name that the Jaina community was known till the Gupta period. It appears from the statement of the Chinese traveler monk Hiuen Tsang that the Nirgranthas formed a prominent religious sect in northern, southern and eastern Bengal in the seventh century A.D. Referring to them as heretics, the pilgrim observed that the Digambara Nirgranthas were very numerous in Pundravardhana and Samatata, northern and southern Bengal respectively. However, Jainism seems to have almost disappeared from Bengal in a subsequent period.

Brahmanic dominance in the Sena period

After the Palas, the Senas came to rule Bengal. The Sena kings were the followers of Brahmanic Hinduism. Under their patronage the Hindu religion flourished to a great extent. Hindu culture in various forms was given impetus. Sanskrit language, which had been given the status of religious language in Hindu religion, was cultivated. By the patronage of the Sena kings Sanskrit language and literature entered into a new era of development. The scholars of the country call it a 'golden age' in the history of Sanskrit language. Interestingly most of the Sena kings were highly intellectually oriented and some cultivated the literature themselves. Obviously Sanskrit scholars were tremendously patronized at the court.

Lakshmana Sena. the last Sena king to rule over most of Bengal, had five great poets in his court, among them Govardhana, Sharana and Jayadeva. Of the five court poets Jaydeva was the author of a famous poem *Gita-govinda*. Some critics put this poem into the class of erotic religious lyrics. The *Gita-govinda* has been enjoying the status of a religious poem among the Vaishnavas of Bengal. The *Gita-govinda* is actually sung in many of the temples of Vishnu by the temple girls in accompaniment with dancing. The poem fills the minds of the devotees of Hari (God) with the splendour of the divine amour between Radha and Krishna. To a devout Vaishnava it is not so much an expression of the longing of the human soul symbolized in Radha and God symbolised in Krishna, as it is the delineation of the transcendental amour of Radha and Krishna into which the devotee enters through religious sympathy and devotion.

Without going into details, we can say that the Sena kings gave much protection and encouragement for the cultivation of Hindu religion and Sanskrit literature. Hindu religion had been nourished by the Pala kings but it was given much more impetus by the Sena kings in Bengal.