

Revival and Cultural Continuity of Buddhism in Contemporary West Bengal: Historical Trajectory and Sociocultural Dynamics

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ABSTRACT

The revival of Buddhism in contemporary West Bengal demonstrates that religion persists not only as a system of belief but also as a dynamic cultural identity. This study aims to analyze the historical trajectory of the Buddhist revival and explain the sociocultural dynamics that sustain its cultural continuity in West Bengal. The study employs a qualitative approach using the historical method through library research on historical documents, archival records, and scholarly literature, which are analyzed using historical and thematic approaches. The findings reveal three major insights. First, the revival of Buddhism in West Bengal represents a continuation of its historical legacy that has been continuously reconstructed in response to social change rather than a temporary phenomenon of religious resurgence. Second, the cultural continuity of Buddhism has been maintained through religious institutions, Buddhist education, religious festivals, and the preservation of the cultural identity of the *Bengali Buddhist* community. Third, the sustainability of the Buddhist community has been supported by the interaction among historical memory, social networks, and the community's capacity to adapt to social change within a pluralistic society. These findings indicate that the sustainability of Buddhism depends not only on religious factors but also on the continuity of historical legacy, cultural traditions, and social practices. This study makes an original contribution by integrating historical and sociocultural perspectives to explain the revival and cultural continuity of Buddhism as an analytical framework for understanding the development of minority religious communities in contemporary India.

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Introduction

Buddhism in the twenty-first century has undergone increasingly complex transformations alongside the expansion of globalization, modernization, and social change across the world (Sastri, 2013). These developments demonstrate that Buddhism is no longer understood solely as a religious tradition centered on individual spiritual practice but also as a source of cultural identity, social ethics, education, and social movements that contribute to addressing contemporary issues, including human rights, social justice, environmental sustainability, and community development. Within this context, Buddhist communities have continuously adapted to social change while preserving the core values of Buddhist teachings. Consequently, the relationship between the continuity of tradition and the dynamics of social transformation has become a central issue in contemporary Buddhist studies (Garfield, 2015; King, 2012; Loy, 2014; McMahan, 2012).

Although India is the birthplace of Buddhism, the development of contemporary Buddhism across the country has not followed a uniform pattern. Some regions have experienced religious revitalization through the establishment of religious institutions, the expansion of community activities, and the strengthening of Buddhist identity, whereas other regions have sustained Buddhist traditions through historical processes shaped by migration, political change, and sociocultural interaction. Among these regions, West Bengal occupies a distinctive position because it serves as a meeting point for diverse Buddhist traditions, including the *Bengali Buddhist* community, Tibetan refugees who settled after 1959, and other Buddhist communities that emerged through migration and geopolitical changes in South Asia (Thakur, 1987). Although Buddhists account for only approximately 282,898 people, or 0.31% of West Bengal's population according to the 2011 Indian Census (Grokopedia, 2012), the community exhibits considerable historical, ethnic, and institutional diversity, making West Bengal one of the most significant centers of contemporary Buddhism in India. This condition positions West Bengal not only as a region that reflects the historical continuity of Buddhism in India but also as a social laboratory that illustrates how a religious tradition adapts to social change, constructs collective identity, and sustains its cultural continuity within a modern society (Lama, 2012).

In West Bengal, these dynamics are reflected in the expansion of Buddhist institutions and religious activities. The revitalization of Buddhist life is evident in the establishment and development of *viharas*, the recognition of *Buddha Jayanti* as an official public holiday in the state, the growth of Buddhist educational institutions and research centers, and the expansion of Buddhist communities formed by *Bengali Buddhists* and Tibetan refugees (Furui, 2022). These developments indicate that Buddhism has been preserved not only as a system of religious belief but also as an integral component of cultural identity and historical heritage that continues to be reproduced through education, religious practice, and community life.

Nevertheless, this revitalization continues to face significant challenges, including the limited number of senior *bhikkhus*, the issue of monastic leadership succession, the influence of modernization on religious practice, and the transformation of cultural identity among younger generations living in an increasingly pluralistic and globalized society. These conditions suggest that the sustainability of Buddhism in West Bengal depends not only on the existence of religious institutions but also on the capacity of Buddhist communities to preserve historical continuity and cultural identity amid contemporary social change (Garfield, 2015; Keown, 2013; McMahan, 2012).

Research on contemporary Buddhism has developed along three major trends. The first trend examines the transformation of Buddhism within the contexts of modernity and globalization. McMahan (2012), Garfield (2015), and Samuel (2015) argue that Buddhism continuously adapts to developments in science, popular culture, globalization, and mindfulness practices, thereby generating increasingly dynamic forms of religious expression. While this body of scholarship demonstrates Buddhism's capacity to transform within modern societies, it primarily emphasizes global dynamics rather than the development of Buddhist communities within specific local contexts.

The second trend views Buddhism as a source of ethical values and social engagement. Keown (2013), King (2012), and Loy (2014) explain that Buddhist values have evolved in response to contemporary issues such as human rights, social justice, environmental sustainability, and civic participation. These studies demonstrate the continuing relevance of Buddhism in addressing modern challenges; however, they do not explain how Buddhist communities sustain their historical continuity and cultural identity amid ongoing social transformation.

The third trend focuses on the historical development of Buddhism in the Bengal region. Verardi (2024), Shakya (2025), and Amar (2012) document the historical trajectory of Buddhism from the Pala Dynasty, its decline following political transformation, and its subsequent revival through the migration of Buddhist communities and the expansion of religious institutions. Although these studies provide comprehensive historical accounts, they remain largely historical-descriptive in orientation and have yet to connect historical trajectory with cultural continuity and the sociocultural dynamics of contemporary Buddhism in West Bengal.

Despite these contributions, previous studies reveal at least two important research gaps. First, most studies examine modernity, the social functions of Buddhism, and Buddhist history as separate themes, leaving the relationship among *historical trajectory*, *cultural continuity*, and *sociocultural dynamics* insufficiently explored. Second, previous scholarship generally interprets the revival of Buddhism either as a process of religious revitalization or as a historical phenomenon without proposing a conceptual framework that explains how Buddhist communities sustain

cultural continuity amid social change. Accordingly, this study analyzes the revival and sustainability of Buddhism in West Bengal by examining the interrelationship among historical trajectory, cultural continuity, and sociocultural dynamics.

Based on these research gaps, this study aims to analyze the *historical trajectory* of the Buddhist revival in West Bengal and to examine the *sociocultural dynamics* that shape the *cultural continuity* of Buddhist communities in the region. More specifically, the study seeks to explain how historical processes, the development of religious institutions, and social transformation interact to sustain Buddhism as both a religious tradition and a cultural identity in West Bengal.

Drawing upon this framework, this study argues that the revival of Buddhism in West Bengal should not be understood merely as a process of religious revitalization or as a consequence of modernization. Rather, it represents a process of historical reconstruction that sustains cultural continuity through the interaction of *historical trajectory*, *sociocultural dynamics*, and the continuity of community identity. The sustainability of Buddhism depends not only on the existence of religious institutions but also on the community's capacity to transmit collective memory, cultural values, religious practices, and social identity through adaptive responses to political change, migration, and modernization. This argument extends contemporary perspectives on Buddhism, which have primarily emphasized transformation in relation to globalization, modernity, social ethics, and global social change (Garfield, 2015; Keown, 2013; Loy, 2014; McMahan, 2012), by demonstrating that religious sustainability also depends on the community's ability to maintain historical and cultural continuity at the local level. Therefore, this study proposes a conceptual framework that integrates *historical trajectory*, *cultural continuity*, and *sociocultural dynamics* as three interrelated dimensions for explaining the sustainability of contemporary Buddhism in West Bengal.

Method

The unit of analysis in this study is the development of contemporary Buddhism in West Bengal, India, with a particular focus on its *historical trajectory*, *cultural continuity*, and *sociocultural dynamics* that shape the sustainability of Buddhist communities in the region.

This study employs a qualitative approach using a library research design (Cresswell, 2014; Williamson & Johanson, 2017). The study adopts this approach because it seeks to reconstruct the historical development of Buddhism and analyze sociocultural change through documentary sources rather than to measure relationships among variables quantitatively. Library research enables the researcher to examine the development of Buddhism in West Bengal comprehensively by synthesizing diverse historical and scholarly sources (Wildemuth, 2016).

The study draws upon both primary and secondary data sources. Primary sources include books, manuscripts, historical documents, and archival records that document the development of Buddhism in West Bengal. Secondary sources consist of peer-reviewed journal articles, research reports, institutional publications, and scholarly literature addressing contemporary Buddhism, the history of Bengal, and the sociocultural dynamics of Buddhist communities. The integration of these two categories of sources provides a comprehensive foundation for analyzing the development of Buddhism in West Bengal (Kuhlthau, 1994).

The researcher collected data through documentary research by identifying, selecting, and critically reviewing literature relevant to the research objectives. The researcher systematically inventoried all documents according to the research themes and subsequently classified them into three principal categories: the historical trajectory of Buddhism, cultural continuity, and sociocultural dynamics. To enhance the credibility of the findings, the study applied source triangulation by comparing multiple primary and secondary sources that examined the same historical and sociocultural phenomena (Gokhale, 2021).

The study analyzed the data qualitatively using thematic analysis (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). The analytical process consisted of data reduction, thematic categorization, interpretation of relationships among themes, and the development of a conceptual synthesis. The analysis focused on identifying the interrelationships among *historical trajectory*, *cultural continuity*, and *sociocultural dynamics* in explaining the development of contemporary Buddhism in West Bengal. Finally, the researcher compared the findings with previous studies to produce a more comprehensive understanding of the sustainability of Buddhism within the context of social and cultural change.

Result

Historical Trajectory of Buddhism in West Bengal

The development of Buddhism in West Bengal demonstrates a historical trajectory characterized by continuity rather than linear progression. Historical reconstruction indicates that Buddhism in the region has evolved through four major phases: its initial dissemination, a period of prosperity, a phase of decline, and a modern revival. The early spread of Buddhism was closely associated with Bengal's geographical proximity to Magadha, the birthplace of the Buddha's teachings. Buddhism subsequently expanded through the patronage of successive dynasties and reached its zenith during the Pala Dynasty, when Bengal became one of the leading centers of Buddhist education and intellectual life in South Asia. Following a period of decline caused by political transformation and the withdrawal of state patronage, Buddhism regained momentum through the revival of religious institutions and Buddhist communities during the colonial and contemporary

periods. This historical trajectory suggests that the development of Buddhism in West Bengal is more appropriately understood as a process of transformation shaped by alternating phases of continuity and change rather than as a pattern of uninterrupted linear growth (J. L. Barua, 2017; Sastri, 2013).

Each historical phase exerted a distinct influence on the position of Buddhism in West Bengal. The period of prosperity emerged during the Pala Dynasty (eighth to twelfth centuries), when strong royal patronage supported Buddhist religious institutions, education, and intellectual development through the establishment of numerous *viharas* and renowned centers of learning such as Nalanda and Vikramashila. During this period, Bengal flourished as one of the most influential intellectual centers of Buddhism in South Asia and became the birthplace of several Buddhist traditions, including *Vajrayana*, *Mantrayana*, *Kalachakrayana*, and *Sahajayana*. In contrast, the decline of the Pala Dynasty was followed by diminishing political support for Buddhism under the Sena Dynasty and the destruction of several Buddhist educational centers after Bakhtiyar Khilji's invasion in the early thirteenth century. These political changes weakened Buddhist institutions, reduced monastic activities, and prompted many *bhikkhus* and Buddhist scholars to migrate to Nepal, Tibet, Myanmar, and other parts of Asia. Therefore, the historical trajectory of Buddhism in West Bengal demonstrates that political transformation directly shaped both the development and decline of Buddhist institutions throughout different historical periods (P. K. Barua, 2007; Sastri, 2013).

The revival of Buddhism became increasingly visible during the colonial period, when the growth of Orientalist scholarship and renewed interest in the historical heritage of Buddhism encouraged the establishment of various Buddhist institutions across Bengal. Historical documents indicate that several Theravāda *viharas* were established during the second half of the nineteenth century, serving as centers for religious education, monastic training, and community activities (Furui, 2022). This development was accompanied by the establishment of Buddhist organizations, the expansion of Buddhist publications in both Bengali and English, and the strengthening of connections between Buddhist communities in Bengal and transnational Buddhist networks in Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and other Asian countries. Consequently, the revival of Buddhism was characterized not only by the expansion of religious institutions but also by the resurgence of intellectual activities, organizational development, and social networks that broadened the scope of Buddhist development in modern West Bengal (Barua, 2017).

Table 1. Historical Trajectory of Buddhism in West Bengal

Period	Development Characteristics	Main Features
Early Dissemination	Introduction of the Buddha's teachings into Bengal	Regional diffusion through interregional interaction
Period of Prosperity (Pala Dynasty)	Strong state patronage of Buddhism	Expansion of <i>viharas</i> , universities, and Buddhist intellectual traditions
Period of Decline	Declining political patronage and foreign invasion	Weakening of Buddhist institutions and migration of Buddhist communities
Modern Revival	Revitalization of Buddhist institutions and communities	Establishment of <i>viharas</i> , Buddhist organizations, educational institutions, and Buddhist publications

Source: Compiled from Barua (2017) and Sastri (2013).

As summarized in Table 1, the historical trajectory of Buddhism in West Bengal demonstrates that the religion has evolved through a continuous sequence of historical processes encompassing its initial dissemination, period of prosperity, decline, and modern revival. The transformations that occurred during each phase did not eliminate the presence of Buddhism; rather, they created a pattern of continuity that enabled the tradition to endure through successive adaptations to political, social, and cultural change. These findings further indicate that the revival of Buddhism in West Bengal did not emerge as a phenomenon disconnected from the past. Instead, it represents the continuation of a historical process that has preserved religious institutions, community networks, and collective memory across generations. Accordingly, the historical trajectory of Buddhism in West Bengal reflects not only the fluctuating development of the religion but also a broader process of historical continuity that has provided the foundation for the contemporary social and cultural life of Buddhist communities. Building upon this historical foundation, the following section examines how this continuity is manifested in the sociocultural dynamics of Buddhist communities in contemporary West Bengal.

Sociocultural Dynamics of Contemporary Buddhism

The development of contemporary Buddhism in West Bengal demonstrates that the sustainability of Buddhist communities depends not only on religious institutions but also on the formation of social networks that integrate ethnic

identity, migration, and religious life within a shared social space. Buddhist communities in the region consist of groups with diverse historical and cultural backgrounds, including *Bengali-speaking Buddhists*, *Tibetan Buddhists*, and several Himalayan Buddhist communities such as the *Tamang*, *Gurung*, and *Lepcha* (Barman, 2022). Despite their distinct traditions and historical experiences, these communities have maintained their religious life through the development of *viharas*, Buddhist organizations, and various educational and social activities that strengthen intercommunity relationships. These findings indicate that contemporary Buddhism in West Bengal has developed not as a homogeneous religious community but as a sociocultural configuration shaped by the interaction of historical legacy, population mobility, and the institutionalization of religious life within a continuously changing society (A. Barua, 2013; Choudhury, 2019).

The settlement patterns of Buddhist communities in West Bengal reveal a tendency toward the formation of geographically concentrated communities rather than a uniform distribution across the region. *Bengali-speaking Buddhists* predominantly reside in Kolkata and its surrounding districts, including North 24 Parganas, South 24 Parganas, Howrah, Hooghly, Nadia, Bardhaman, Medinipur, Jalpaiguri, Alipurduar, and Darjeeling. Within these areas, neighborhoods commonly known as *Baruapara* and *Buddhapara* have developed as settlements inhabited primarily by Buddhist communities. These settlement patterns reflect not only demographic concentration but also the creation of social spaces that enable communities to preserve religious activities, kinship networks, and collective cultural life. In this context, settlement locations constitute an essential component of the sociocultural dynamics of contemporary Buddhism because they provide the community base for the continued development of religious institutions, educational activities, and various forms of social engagement (N. C. Barua, 2014).

The development of *viharas* in West Bengal demonstrates that these religious institutions perform functions that extend far beyond ritual activities. Documentary evidence indicates that since the mid-twentieth century, Buddhist communities have gradually established dozens of *viharas* throughout both North and South Bengal, where they serve as centers for religious education, moral instruction, community gatherings, and the preservation of Buddhist traditions. In North Bengal, for example, *Uttarbanga Bauddha Sanghashram* was established in Malbazar (1950), followed by *Buddha Jayanti Bihar* in Nagrakata (1956) and *Buddhabharati Bihar* in Siliguri (1963). These institutions were subsequently complemented by the establishment of approximately twenty additional *viharas* across several districts. Following the Partition of Bengal in 1947, South Bengal experienced even more rapid institutional development through the establishment of more than fifty *viharas* and Buddhist institutions distributed across Kolkata, North 24 Parganas, South 24 Parganas, Howrah, Hooghly, Nadia, and neighboring districts.

"... these monasteries, besides serving religious functions, act as vital cultural hubs for the preservation of Buddhist rituals, education, and community activities" (A. Barua, 2013, p. 121).

This evidence indicates that *viharas* have evolved into social institutions that integrate religious functions, education, and community life within a single institutional framework, making them one of the principal pillars of the sociocultural dynamics of contemporary Buddhism in West Bengal.

The sociocultural dynamics of contemporary Buddhism in West Bengal are further reflected in the frequency and diversity of religious and cultural activities that actively involve community participation. Religious celebrations such as *Buddha Purnima*, *Ashadi Purnima*, *Prabarana Purnima*, and *Kathin Cheebar Daan* are collectively organized in *viharas* with the participation of *bhikkhus*, lay Buddhists, and local Buddhist organizations. These activities extend beyond ritual observance to include *Dhamma* lectures, moral education, scripture recitation, *dāna* (charitable giving), youth development programs, and various social activities that bring together community members from different regions. As noted by Choudhury (2019), *viharas* during major Buddhist festivals function as shared spaces where religious practice intersects with education and community interaction. Consequently, contemporary Buddhist life in West Bengal is sustained not only through the existence of religious institutions but also through recurring communal practices embedded in the everyday lives of Buddhist communities.

Table 2. Sociocultural Dynamics of Contemporary Buddhism in West Bengal

Aspect	Empirical Findings	Sociocultural Characteristics
Community composition	Bengali, Tibetan, and Himalayan Buddhist communities	Multiethnic Buddhist community
Settlement pattern	<i>Baruapara</i> , <i>Buddhapara</i> , and urban settlement clusters	Concentrated communal settlement pattern
Religious institutions	More than 70 <i>viharas</i> and Buddhist organizations	Centers of religion, education, and social interaction
Religious activities	<i>Buddha Purnima</i> , <i>Kathin Cheebar Daan</i> , <i>Dhamma</i> lectures	Collective religious participation
Community organizations	Regional Buddhist associations	Strengthening social cohesion

As summarized in Table 2, the sociocultural dynamics of contemporary Buddhism in West Bengal are reflected not only in the diversity of Buddhist communities but also in the formation of concentrated settlement patterns, the expansion of networks of *viharas* and Buddhist organizations, and the continuity of religious and social activities. Collectively, these elements demonstrate that Buddhist life in West Bengal has developed through the close interaction among community networks, religious institutions, and social practices that mutually reinforce one another. *Viharas* function not only as places of worship but also as community gathering spaces, centers for Buddhist education, venues for youth development, and institutions that facilitate a wide range of social and cultural activities involving broad community participation.

Accordingly, these sociocultural dynamics sustain not only religious activities but also the broader social structure that supports the continuity of Buddhist communities amid contemporary social transformation. These findings suggest that the development of Buddhism in West Bengal depends not merely on the expansion of religious institutions but also on the community's capacity to cultivate enduring social, institutional, and cultural relationships. Building upon this analysis, the following section examines how these sociocultural dynamics contribute to the formation of *cultural continuity* within Buddhist communities in West Bengal.

Cultural Continuity of Buddhism

The continuity of Buddhism in West Bengal demonstrates that the existence of Buddhist communities has been sustained not only through the presence of religious institutions but also through the continuous intergenerational transmission of values, practices, and cultural identity. A review of historical and documentary sources indicates that Buddhist communities have consistently reproduced their religious traditions through ritual observance, *Dhamma* education, the use of Buddhist language and symbols, and the active involvement of families and local communities in everyday religious life. These processes have enabled Buddhist teachings to remain embedded in social life despite historical transformations, population migration, modernization, and contemporary sociocultural change. Accordingly, the continuity of Buddhism in West Bengal is reflected not merely in the persistence of Buddhism as a religious belief system but also in the ongoing transmission of cultural traditions that preserve the collective identity of Buddhist communities across generations (A. Barua, 2013; Choudhury, 2019).

This cultural continuity operates through multiple complementary mechanisms within Buddhist community life. Documentary evidence shows that families serve as the primary setting for introducing Buddhist values to younger generations, whereas *viharas* function as centers for *Dhamma* education, moral

formation, and religious instruction. At the same time, major religious celebrations such as *Buddha Purnima*, *Kathina*, *Magha Puja*, and *Asalha Puja* provide collective occasions that bring together different segments of Buddhist society through ritual activities, educational programs, and social interaction (Chakrabarti, 2016). Community participation in these events demonstrates that the transmission of tradition does not occur as an individual process but rather through collective participation that is continually reproduced in everyday life. Consequently, the continuity of Buddhism in West Bengal has been sustained not only through the transmission of religious teachings but also through social practices that enable Buddhist cultural identity to remain vibrant amid contemporary social transformation (A. Barua, 2013; Choudhury, 2019).

Although Buddhist communities in West Bengal continue to preserve long-standing religious traditions, the process of cultural transmission has not remained static. Documentary sources indicate that Buddhist communities have continuously adapted their ritual practices, religious education, and organizational activities in response to changing social conditions, educational development, urbanization, and increasing social mobility. On the one hand, these adaptations have enabled Buddhist communities to maintain the relevance of their teachings and religious practices within contemporary society. On the other hand, these changes have introduced new challenges, including the limited number of senior *bhikkhus*, the need for monastic leadership succession, and changing orientations among younger generations toward Buddhist cultural identity. These findings demonstrate that the continuity of Buddhism in West Bengal has not been achieved through the passive preservation of tradition but rather through adaptive processes that allow Buddhist values and identity to be transmitted within an evolving social context.

Table 3. Forms of Cultural Continuity of Buddhism in Contemporary West Bengal

Dimension	Empirical Findings	Contribution to Cultural Continuity
Family	Transmission of Buddhist values to younger generations	Intergenerational continuity
Viharas	<i>Dhamma</i> education and moral formation	Institutional continuity
Religious festivals	<i>Buddha Purnima</i> , <i>Kathina</i> , <i>Magha Puja</i> , <i>Asalha Puja</i>	Collective cultural reproduction
Community organizations	Buddhist associations and community activities	Strengthening collective identity

Adaptation	Educational development, organizational renewal, and social adjustment	Sustainability amid social change
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Accordingly, the continuity of Buddhism in West Bengal has been sustained through the interaction of multiple complementary mechanisms, including the transmission of values within families, the role of *viharas* as centers of religious education and community life, the collective observance of religious rituals, and the activities of Buddhist community organizations. These mechanisms demonstrate that cultural continuity does not occur naturally or automatically but is maintained through the continuous reproduction of social practices carried out by Buddhist communities. At the same time, these processes reveal various forms of adaptation to social transformation, including educational development, increasing population mobility, and the challenge of religious leadership succession (see Table 3). Therefore, the continuity of Buddhism in West Bengal is reflected not only in the preservation of religious traditions but also in the community's capacity to sustain its cultural identity through ongoing processes of transmission and adaptation within contemporary social life.

The findings demonstrate that the development of Buddhism in West Bengal has been shaped by the close interaction among *historical trajectory*, *sociocultural dynamics*, and *cultural continuity*. The *historical trajectory* explains how Buddhism has endured through successive political and social transformations, *sociocultural dynamics* illustrate the development of Buddhist communities, institutions, and religious activities within contemporary society, and *cultural continuity* demonstrates that the sustainability of Buddhism has been maintained through the transmission of values, cultural identity, and continuous adaptation to changing social conditions. Collectively, these three findings indicate that the revival of Buddhism in West Bengal represents an ongoing historical process in which history, community, and culture interact to shape the contemporary existence of Buddhism.

Discussion

The historical trajectory of Buddhism in West Bengal demonstrates that the development of a religious tradition does not always follow a linear pattern of continuous growth. Instead, the history of Buddhism in this region reveals interconnected cycles of expansion, flourishing, decline, and revival. This pattern indicates that the contemporary revival of Buddhism did not emerge as a sudden phenomenon but rather evolved through a process of historical reconstruction that has preserved continuity between past experiences and present-day religious life. Therefore, the *historical trajectory* does not merely document historical change; it

also explains how collective memory has provided the foundation for the reconstitution of Buddhist identity in West Bengal.

This interpretation extends the existing scholarship on modern Buddhism, which has primarily emphasized religious transformation as a consequence of modernity and globalization. McMahan (2012) argued that contemporary Buddhism has evolved through continuous adaptation to scientific knowledge, political developments, and social change, while Garfield (2015) demonstrated that the interaction between Buddhist traditions and modernity has generated diverse forms of religious practice within global Buddhist communities. Although these perspectives provide valuable explanations of Buddhist transformation in the modern era, they do not fully explain how Buddhist communities reconstruct historical continuity after experiencing prolonged periods of decline. In the context of West Bengal, the revival of Buddhism demonstrates that modernization has progressed alongside efforts to reconstruct historical heritage as a source of legitimacy for contemporary Buddhist identity.

This interpretation also aligns with historical studies of Buddhism in Bengal, which identify political and social change as key factors shaping the religion's historical development. Amar (2012), Verardi (2024), and Shakya (2025) argued that the decline of Buddhism in India did not erase its historical legacy because institutional heritage, religious sites, and cultural memory continued to survive and later became the foundation for the reemergence of Buddhist life. However, these studies primarily document historical processes rather than explain how historical trajectories contribute to the formation of contemporary Buddhist identity. The case of West Bengal demonstrates that history functions not only as a record of the past but also as a cultural resource that communities continuously reproduce to sustain their collective existence in the present.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the *historical trajectory* constitutes the principal foundation underlying the existence of contemporary Buddhism in West Bengal. The revival of Buddhism reflects not only the revitalization of religious life but also a process of historical reconstruction that connects collective memory, cultural heritage, and community identity within a continuous historical framework. This perspective extends current understandings of modern Buddhism, which have largely associated religious development with the transformative effects of modernity, by demonstrating that the sustainability of a religious tradition also depends on a community's capacity to reconstruct its historical legacy as the basis for preserving identity and ensuring the continuity of Buddhist life in the contemporary era.

The sociocultural dynamics of Buddhism in West Bengal demonstrate that the sustainability of religious life depends not only on the number of adherents or the existence of religious traditions but also on the development of social institutions that support community life. *Viharas*, Buddhist organizations,

community settlement patterns, and various educational and social activities illustrate that religious institutions perform functions far beyond serving as places of worship. These institutions operate as centers of social interaction, *Dhamma* education, youth development, and the strengthening of solidarity among Buddhist communities. Accordingly, the development of contemporary Buddhism in West Bengal has progressed through a process of institutionalization that enables religious life to remain organized while adapting to ongoing social change.

This interpretation is consistent with King's (2012) concept of *Socially Engaged Buddhism*, which views Buddhist institutions as mechanisms for applying Buddhist values to social life through education, community service, and the promotion of social solidarity. From this perspective, *viharas* function not merely as ritual spaces but also as institutions that connect religious teachings with the social needs of local communities. The expansion of educational activities, community organizations, and diverse social programs in West Bengal demonstrates that these social functions have become an integral component of contemporary Buddhist life. Therefore, the sustainability of Buddhist communities depends not only on religious practice but also on the active involvement of religious institutions in cultivating social relationships at the community level.

This interpretation also complements Keown's (2013) argument that modern Buddhism increasingly emphasizes lay participation and organizational development as essential components of contemporary religious life. Likewise, McMahan (2012) argued that modern Buddhism has evolved through continuous interaction with social, political, and cultural transformation, resulting in increasingly diverse institutional forms. However, both studies primarily explain Buddhist transformation from a global perspective. The experience of West Bengal demonstrates that this adaptive process has been driven by the strengthening of local institutions that emerged in response to the needs of the community itself. Consequently, the social functions of *viharas*, Buddhist organizations, and community networks have become indispensable elements in sustaining Buddhist life at the local level.

These findings suggest that the development of contemporary Buddhism cannot be understood solely in terms of increasing numbers of adherents or expanding religious activities. Instead, community sustainability largely depends on the capacity of social institutions to connect religious practice with everyday social life. This perspective extends existing scholarship on modern Buddhism by demonstrating that religious institutions function not only as guardians of religious tradition but also as bridges linking religion, education, community organizations, and broader social life. Through these interconnected roles, Buddhist institutions serve as the principal mechanisms that enable communities to preserve both their existence and their relevance within contemporary society.

The continuity of Buddhism in West Bengal further demonstrates that Buddhist identity has been sustained not merely through the preservation of rituals or the existence of religious institutions but through an ongoing process of cultural reproduction embedded in community life. Families, *viharas*, *Dhamma* education, Buddhist organizations, and major religious festivals collectively create social mechanisms through which Buddhist values continue to be transmitted across generations. Nevertheless, this continuity has not remained static. The community has continuously adapted to changing social conditions, educational development, increasing population mobility, and the demands of modern life, thereby preserving its identity through continuous adjustment to evolving circumstances. Accordingly, *cultural continuity* is more appropriately understood as a process of cultural adaptation that sustains Buddhist identity rather than as the preservation of tradition in an unchanged form.

This interpretation expands prevailing understandings of modern Buddhism, which have largely associated its development with modernization and religious transformation. McMahan (2012) argued that modern Buddhism has evolved through adaptation to changing social and cultural conditions, while Garfield (2015) demonstrated that the interaction between Buddhist traditions and modernity has generated increasingly diverse forms of religious practice without undermining the fundamental principles of Buddhist teachings. These perspectives suggest that modernity does not necessarily disrupt religious traditions but can instead create opportunities for new forms of religious continuity. The experience of West Bengal reflects a similar pattern, in which changes in institutions, education, and organizational structures have strengthened the community's capacity to preserve its cultural identity amid contemporary social transformation.

These findings also support the arguments advanced by Loy (2014) and Samuel (2015), who emphasized that the sustainability of Buddhism in the modern era depends on its capacity to respond to social change without abandoning its foundational principles. Loy (2014) argued that contemporary Buddhism has become increasingly engaged with social issues as a response to global challenges, whereas Samuel (2015) demonstrated that the emergence of practices such as mindfulness reflects the adaptation of Buddhist teachings to modern contexts. Nevertheless, both studies primarily examine the transformation of Buddhist practice at the global level. The experience of West Bengal demonstrates that this adaptive process also operates through local mechanisms, including families, communities, educational institutions, Buddhist organizations, and religious activities that collectively preserve the continuity of Buddhist cultural identity across generations.

This discussion demonstrates that the continuity of Buddhism has not been sustained because traditions have remained unchanged, but because Buddhist communities have continuously adapted their practices, institutions, and social life

to changing historical circumstances while preserving the core values of Buddhist teachings. This perspective extends existing scholarship on modern Buddhism by demonstrating that the relationship between modernity and tradition is not inherently dichotomous. Rather, modernity can become part of a continuous process through which *cultural continuity* is maintained by ongoing adaptation. Accordingly, the sustainability of Buddhist identity is more appropriately understood as the outcome of a dynamic interaction among historical heritage, social transformation, and the community's capacity to reproduce cultural values within contemporary society.

Taken together, the discussion demonstrates that the development of contemporary Buddhism in West Bengal cannot be adequately understood through a single historical, social, or cultural dimension in isolation. The *historical trajectory* explains how historical experience has shaped the foundation of Buddhist community identity, *sociocultural dynamics* illustrate how religious institutions and social organizations sustain community life, and *cultural continuity* demonstrates how Buddhist identity has been preserved through continuous processes of cultural transmission and adaptation. These three dimensions are closely interconnected and collectively explain the sustainability of Buddhism as both a religious tradition and a cultural system within contemporary society.

This perspective makes a conceptual contribution by integrating *historical trajectory*, *sociocultural dynamics*, and *cultural continuity* into a unified analytical framework. Previous studies of modern Buddhism have generally examined these three dimensions separately through historical, sociological, or cultural approaches. Consequently, relatively little attention has been devoted to explaining how these dimensions interact to shape the long-term sustainability of Buddhist communities. The present discussion demonstrates that the continuity of Buddhism cannot be explained solely by historical experience or sociocultural dynamics in isolation. Instead, it emerges through the continuous interaction among collective historical memory, social institutions, and cultural reproduction embedded in community life.

This discussion also extends the *Buddhism and Modernity* perspective developed by McMahan (2012). Existing scholarship on modern Buddhism generally conceptualizes modernization as a transformative process that reshapes religious practices, organizational structures, and religious identities. However, the experience of Buddhism in West Bengal demonstrates that modernization does not necessarily produce discontinuity with religious tradition. Instead, modernization can function as a medium through which communities adapt their institutions, educational systems, organizational structures, and religious practices while preserving the core values transmitted across generations. Within this context, *viharas*, Buddhist educational institutions, and Buddhist organizations function not only as religious institutions but also as mechanisms of cultural reproduction that sustain Buddhist identity amid ongoing social transformation. This perspective

enriches the study of modern Buddhism by identifying adaptation as the principal mechanism through which cultural continuity is maintained.

The implications of this discussion are both theoretical and practical. From a theoretical perspective, this study advances the development of modern Buddhist theory by demonstrating the importance of the interaction among historical experience, social institutions, and cultural adaptation in explaining the sustainability of religion within contemporary societies. From a practical perspective, these findings provide a foundation for developing strategies to preserve Buddhist cultural heritage by strengthening the role of *viharas* as centers of education, community development, and the intergenerational transmission of cultural values. Furthermore, the findings may inform policies for safeguarding Buddhist heritage, improving Buddhist religious education, and empowering Buddhist community organizations to preserve their cultural identity while continuously adapting to evolving social conditions.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the development of contemporary Buddhism in West Bengal cannot be understood merely as a process of religious revitalization but rather as a continuous historical and sociocultural process. The *historical trajectory* reveals that the revival of Buddhism represents the continuation of a historical legacy that has shaped the identity of Buddhist communities. At the same time, *sociocultural dynamics* demonstrate that community sustainability depends not only on the growth in the number of adherents but also on the development of social institutions, including *viharas*, Buddhist organizations, *Dhamma* education, and diverse communal activities. Furthermore, *cultural continuity* shows that the sustainability of Buddhism has not been maintained through the static preservation of tradition but through the continuous transmission of values and cultural adaptation that enables Buddhist identity to endure amid social change and modernity.

The principal contribution of this study lies in developing an analytical framework that integrates *historical trajectory*, *sociocultural dynamics*, and *cultural continuity* as three interrelated dimensions shaping the sustainability of contemporary Buddhism. This perspective extends the *Buddhism and Modernity* framework by demonstrating that modernization does not necessarily produce discontinuity with religious tradition. Instead, modernization can strengthen cultural continuity by reinforcing social institutions and facilitating the reproduction of cultural values within community life. Consequently, this study not only advances scholarship on contemporary Buddhism but also offers a conceptual perspective that explains how religion, history, and culture interact to sustain religious identity within societies undergoing continuous social transformation.

This study has several limitations because it employs a qualitative library research approach that primarily relies on historical documents and scholarly literature and therefore does not directly examine the lived experiences of contemporary Buddhist communities in West Bengal. Future research should incorporate ethnographic methods, oral history, and field-based investigations to explore how families, *viharas*, Buddhist organizations, and younger generations construct and transmit Buddhist identity in everyday life. Such approaches would provide a deeper understanding of the mechanisms underlying *cultural continuity* while further advancing theoretical perspectives on contemporary Buddhism within increasingly dynamic social contexts.

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