

## Buddhist Culture of Contemporary West Bengal (Reflections on the Bengali-speaking Buddhists)

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### ABSTRACT

Since the inception of Buddhism, the people of Bengal have maintained a very close relationship with Buddhist ideologies. In fact, Bengal appeared as a dominant center of Buddhist culture in the early medieval period (sixth to twelfth century CE) both for its institutional flavour as well as for state-sponsorship. However, with the fall of royal patronage and the conversion of the Buddhists to other religious faiths, Buddhism gradually lost its prominence in Bengal. It was during the colonial period (1757 to 1947 CE), Buddhism again started reviving in different corners of Bengal principally in the early twentieth century. However, the 'Partition of Bengal Province (in 1947) appeared as a serious setback for the fate of Buddhism in this region. The East Bengali Buddhists had started a new episode of the struggle for survival in India more precisely in West Bengal as 'refugees' or as 'asylum seekers. After their migration to West Bengal, the Bengali-speaking Buddhists have aspired to build up several *Viharas* (monasteries), *Sanghasrams* (spiritual hermitage), temples, and institutions in Kolkata, Sub-Himalayan Bengal, and certain other districts of West Bengal. They have preserved and maintained the Buddhist socio-cultural traditions that they have inherited from the southeastern corner of former East Bengal. This paper highlights all these aspects of the Buddhist culture of West Bengal with a fresh outlook.

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### Introduction

Since the inception of Buddhism, the people of Bengal have maintained a very close relationship with Buddhist ideologies. In fact, Bengal appeared as a dominant centre of Buddhist culture in the early medieval period (sixth to twelfth century CE)

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both for its institutional flavour as well as for state sponsorship (Furui, 2022; Thakur, 1987). However, with the fall of royal patronage and the conversion of the Buddhists into other religious faiths (since the early thirteenth century CE), Buddhism gradually lost its prominence in India including Bengal (Chakrabarti, 2016). It was during the colonial period (1757 to 1947 CE), Buddhism again started reviving in different corners of Bengal principally in the early twentieth century. However, the 'Partition of Bengal Province in 1947 (as an essential prerequisite for the birth of independent India and Pakistan) appeared as a serious setback for the fate of Buddhism of Bengal. The East Bengali Buddhists had started a new episode of the struggle for survival in India more precisely in West Bengal as 'refugees' or as 'asylum seekers. They built several monasteries and institutions in different places in West Bengal. Concurrently, the Scheduled Castes (lower Caste Hindus) of West Bengal have shown their utmost interest in the Neo-Buddhism (*Navajana*) as introduced by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar (1891-1956). On the other hand, the hilly regions of the northern part of West Bengal (Darjeeling, Kalimpong, Jalpaiguri, and Alipurduar) have warmly received the Tibetan Buddhists, especially after the outbreak of the Indo-China War (1962 CE). Thus Buddhist culture is being disseminated in West Bengal in three distinct ways: (a) the growth of Buddhist institutions by the Buddhists of East Bengal origin, (b) the conversion of Scheduled Castes to Neo-Buddhism, and (c) the dissemination of Buddhism among the indigenous communities (Bhotias, Tamangs, Lepchas, Gurungs) and Tibetans of hilly regions of North Bengal. In this paper, I'll highlight the process of dissemination of Buddhist culture in West Bengal with special reference to the Bengali-speaking Buddhists.

## **Method**

### ***Research context***

This research wants to look at the history of Buddhism in the Bengal area. Therefore, in this study a form of research was used, namely a form of library research. Data collection was carried out in this study by tracing the literature or studying books and other sources relevant to the research problem. The library method is a method that is carried out by reading books or magazines with other data sources in the library (Wildemuth, 2016). Meanwhile, according to Zed Mestika, library research or library research is a series of activities related to methods of collecting library data, reading and recording and processing library collection materials without the need for field research (Kuhlthau, 2002). This research activity was carried out by collecting data from various literature, which was used not only in the form of books, but also in the form of other materials such as articles, journals, and others.

### ***Instrument and data collection***

The data used in this study were collected from various sources as well as the literature on the research problem. In this study, two types of data were used, namely primary data and secondary data. The primary data source is the main data source used in this study and comes from books that discuss issues of Buddhism in

Bengal. Secondary data sources are sources that are collected after the primary data is collected. This secondary source can help complement the primary data. Secondary sources in this study came from literature reviews in the form of books, journals, papers, and previous studies.

### ***Data analysis***

In order to determine the validity of the data, inspection techniques are needed. The implementation of data checking techniques is based on a number of certain criteria. In this research, the priority is the mere credibility test which is carried out by checking the validity of sources and methods with the aim of achieving nothing but the truth about existing phenomena. test the validity of the sources referred to in this study, namely by comparing and checking back the degree of trust of an information that has been obtained previously. As for testing the validity of the method, namely checking the degree of trust in research findings and checking the degree of trust in several data sources.

### **Findings**

#### ***Buddhism in Precolonial Bengal***

Bengal has maintained a very close relationship with Buddhism since its introduction by Gautama Buddha [623 BCE-543 BCE] in Magadha. After attaining Buddhahood (588 BCE), Gautama Buddha was engaged in the propagation of his ideas with his followers and Sangha.<sup>1</sup> So it is probable that Bengal, being an immediate neighbour of Magadha, was induced by Buddhism. But due to the lack of authentic historical pieces of evidence, it is quite difficult to establish the argument that Buddhism was embraced by the people of Bengal in Buddha's time. However, the Burmese (Myanmar) sources of Buddhist history suggest that Gautama Buddha visited Sudharmapur of ancient Myanmar in 580 BCE (J. L. Barua, 2017). Naturally, it is often claimed by the historians of Buddhist Studies that the Southeastern part of Chittagong and Chittagong Hill Tracts (having a border with Myanmar) were influenced by Buddhism by the sixth century BCE.

From the days of the Haryanka dynasty (c 546 BCE- 4th century BCE) to the Mauryan rule (320 BCE to 200 BCE), Buddhism became a popular religion in different regions of Bengal. The archaeological shreds of evidence show that Buddhism became extremely popular in Pundravardhan (North Bengal) (J. L. Barua, 2017). It became more prosperous during the reign of the Mauryan King of Ashoka (273-232 BCE). After the Battle of Kalinga (261 BC), Ashoka embraced Buddhism and took royal initiatives to spread the messages of Buddha in different parts of the world. The 'Third Buddhist Council' (Buddhist Sangeeti) was held under his initiative (247 BCE/253 BCE). Ashoka used different languages (including Prakrita and Greek both in Brahmi and Kharasthi scripts) in his inscriptions and pillars to spread the messages of Buddhism among common people.

The most significant outcome of the Third Buddhist Council (247 BCE) was the unification of different sects of the Buddhists. The Tripitakas got a complete written form. Moreover, this Council suggested the king for sending Buddhist Missions to different countries including Sri Lanka (Simhala), Myanmar

(Suvarnabhumi), Syria, Macedonia, Egypt, etc. However, there was no Buddhist Mission for Bengal. It confirms the fact that during the period between the 6th Century BCE and the 3rd Century BCE Buddhism became popular in Bengal. Moreover, the Mahasthangarh Inscription (3rd Century BCE), Karandaran Monastery, etc. prove that Buddhism had a prosperous condition in Bengal.

In the post-Mauryan period, Buddhism got a temporary setback from the Sunga rulers (187 BCE- 30 BCE). However, the Buddhist ideology further evolved in India under the Kushana rulers (1st Century BCE). During the kingship of Kanishka (78 CE-103 CE), Buddhism got the most prosperous shape in the Indian subcontinent. Under his patronage, the Fourth Buddhist Council was held at Kuban Bihar (Jalandhar) in 78 CE.<sup>3</sup> Along with the translation of Tripitaka in Sanskrit, several commentaries and treatises were written in that Council. However, the Fourth Buddhist Council had accepted two different ways of attaining Nirvana. They were Hinajana and Mahajana order. Later, the Hinajanis identified themselves as Therabadis.

With the suggestion of this Council, Kanishka sent Buddhist missions to different countries in East and Central Asia including China, Tibet, Nepal, Korea, Japan, Turkey, and Afghanistan (Gandhara). The Kushanas brought prosperity to Buddhism in the Indian subcontinent. They popularized Buddhism in East Asia and Central Asia which eventually encouraged the Chinese Buddhist scholars to visit India during the Gupta period (320 CE to 500 CE) and during the reign of Harshavardhana (590-647). At the same time, the Kushanas popularised the worship of the image of Buddha in different forms.

Because of political changes in North India in the 4th Century CE and lack of state patronage, Buddhism could not attain much prosperity in Eastern India during the pre-Pala rule in Bengal. However, the Chinese travelers [those who visited Bengal in the Pre-Pala period like Hieun Tsang (Yuan Chawan) and I-Tsing] had recorded the prosperity of Buddhist institutions (stupas and Sangharams) as well as the followers of Buddhism in Samatata (East Bengal), Karnasubarna (Central Bengal), Tamralipta (South-western Bengal) and Pundravardhana (North Bengal). Like the early Gupta rulers (4th – 6th Century CE), King Sasanka of Gauda (606-636 CE) opposed Buddhism. Even he attempted to destroy the Buddhist monasteries and institutions. It eventually gave a temporary setback to Buddhism in Eastern India including Bengal. However, Bengal produced a prominent Buddhist scholar in the 6th Century CE named Silabhadra (529-554 BCE).

Buddhism again got royal patronage with the rise of the Pala Empire (750-1200 CE). Shri Gopala (750-770 BCE), the founder king of the Pala dynasty, had established several Buddhist monasteries in Nalanda (present Bihar province of India) and other places of his kingdom for reviving Buddhism. His son Dharmapala, the greatest Pala king (770-810 BCE), along with other Buddhist monasteries; founded the famous Bikramsila University. Both Nalanda University and Bikramsila University received the attention of Buddhist scholars from different Asian countries. The state patronage to Buddhism was further carried out by king Devapala (810-850). However, after the death of Devapala, the Palas could not maintain their political prosperity. Internal conflicts and invasions from outside had contributed to the decline of the Palas. However, they could maintain their rule till the twelfth century CE.

During the rule of Palas, Buddhism experienced different changes including the introduction of Tantricism.<sup>4</sup> Different groups of Tantricism like (i) Mantrajan, (ii) Bajrajan, (iii) Kalachakrajan, and (iv) Sahajajan got prosperity in Bengal under the Palas through the writings and propaganda of the Buddhist 'Siddhyacharyas' of Bengal. The Buddhist Siddhacharyas eventually contributed to the growth of different Buddhist sects in Bengal (like Nathadharma, Kaulyadharma, Abadhuta, Sahajia, and Baul). All these trends encouraged the so-called lower caste communities of Bengal to embrace Buddhism as per their choices.

The most significant contribution of the Palas to the growth of Buddhism was their patronage of different Buddhist universities and institutions (like Nalanda, Bikramshila, Odantapuri, Sampur Mahavihar, Jagaddal Mahavihar, Mahavihar, Devikot Vihar, Halud Vihar, Sitakot Vihar, Salban Vihar, etc.). These institutions got international attention in those days.

The prosperity of Buddhism began to decline during the post-Pala rule. The rise of the Sena rulers (1095 CE- 1207 CE) appeared as a serious challenge to the existence of Buddhism in Bengal. The Sena rulers of Bengal had attempted to revive Brahmanical Hinduism. Naturally, the Buddhist deities, institutions, and scholars lost royal patronage. On the other hand, Brahmanical Hinduism got direct 'state-sponsorship' from the Senas. Thus the Buddhists gradually lost their prosperity in Bengal.

Almost at the same time, the invasion of Bakhtiyar Khilji (1207 CE) appeared as a devastating episode both for Brahmanical Hinduism and the Buddhists of Bengal. Bakhtiyar Khalji himself had destroyed Nalanda, Bikramsila, and many other Buddhist institutions which were filled with Buddhist texts. Many Buddhist monks and scholars fled from the country and took shelter in Nepal, Tibet, Odisha, and Myanmar (Shastri, 2013). The Buddhist monasteries were deserted. Many of them eventually were transformed into mosques (J. L. Barua, 2017). And under the rule of the Bengal Sultans (1200 CE to 1538 CE), the Mughals (1576-1707), and Bengal Nawabs (1707-1772), the Buddhists and Buddhism did not get any support from the state.

In spite of opposition, torture, conversion, and apathetic attitude, Buddhism survived in certain remote regions of Bengal, especially in the Southeastern part of present Bangladesh. The Chakmas, Arakanese, Marmas, Rakhains, and Mag Baruars maintained the Buddhist traditions in their own way. On the other hand, Tibetan Buddhism influenced the Himalayan kingdoms of the northern side of Bengal (especially in Sikkim and Bhutan).

### ***Buddhism of Bengal under the Colonial Rule***

The establishment of British rule in Bengal [and later in India, especially after the Battle of Plessey (1757 CE), Battle of Buxer (1764), Grant of Diwani (1765), the Anglo-Maratha Wars (1775-1818), the Anglo-Mysore Wars (1767-1799), the Anglo-Sikh Wars (1824-26), and Anglo-Burmese Wars (1823-26)] gave a new life to Buddhism in Bengal. The Orientalists, especially the British administrative scholars; started studying and reinterpreting the Buddhist texts and Ashokan inscriptions. Simultaneously, the English-educated Buddhist scholars of Bengal as well as non-Buddhist Bengali scholars had started writing the history of Buddhism. These trends

eventually initiated a process of rejuvenation in Buddhism. Here, we have noticed the growth of two basic trends: (a) the foundation of Buddhist institutions, and (b) the publication of Buddhist literature.

The early attempt for establishing a Buddhist monastery in modern Bengal was started in the second half of the nineteenth century. It was initiated by Saramedha Mahasthabir, a monk from Arakan (Myanmar). He introduced the *Therabad* among the Buddhists of Chittagong in 1857.<sup>5</sup> With the support of Rani Kalindi (of the Chakmas) Saramedha Mahasthabir laid the foundation of a Buddhist monastery at Rangunia (Chittagong district of Bangladesh). Bhikkhu Chandramohun (Punnachar) was entrusted with the charge of this monastery. Later (in 1874), another monastery was founded at Pahartali (Rangunia) (N. C. Barua, 2014). Along with the Buddhist monastery; Rani Kalinda introduced a Buddhist festival in her locality to popularise Buddhism. Incidentally, a few Buddhist monks from Chittagong had participated in the Fifth Buddhist Council held in Mandalay (Burma) in 1871.

Within a span of fifty years (1879-1929), the Buddhists of Bengal had founded several organizations in Chittagong (a south-eastern district of Bengal having a border with Burma) as well as in Calcutta. Being the political (1772-1911) and cultural capital of India; Calcutta attracted many Buddhist scholars and lay Buddhists of Eastern Bengal. From 1872 to 1947, the Bengali Buddhists published several works in Bengali and English from Calcutta and Chittagong. In this context, we must recognize the contributions of Phul Chandra Barua, Dharmaraj Barua (1860-1894), Ram Chandra Barua (1847-1922), Nabaraj Pandit (1866-1896), Sarbananda Barua (1866-1908), Agrasar Mahasthabir (1863-1942), Pragnalok Mahasthabir (1878-1970), Bangsadwip Mahasthabir (1883-1971), Bhikkhu Silabhadra (1887-1974) and of course the name of Dr. Benimadhab Barua (1888-1948). They not only aimed to organize the Buddhists of Bengal but also popularised the Buddhist teaching in the Bengali language.

The Buddhist organizations of Bengal centred at Calcutta [like Mahabodhi Society, Bengal Buddhist Association (Bouddha Dharmankur Sabha), and Bangiya Bouddha Samiti, etc.] played a significant role in the Buddhist studies and popularising Buddhist culture in West Bengal. With all these initiatives, the Bengali Buddhists established their contacts with the Buddhists in other countries including Burma (Myanmar), Thailand, and Sri Lanka. In this context, Burma and Sri Lanka were very much helpful in the growth of Buddhist culture in colonial Bengal.

### **Partition of Bengal (1947), Displacement and Resettlement of the Buddhists**

The prosperity of Buddhist culture got a serious setback due to the partition of Bengal Province (1947). Being threatened by the majority community as well as the fear of persecution had compelled the Buddhists (along with other minorities) of Eastern Bengal to migrate to India both as 'voluntary' and 'forced migrates'.<sup>6</sup> The Buddhist population of East Bengal (mainly the Mogs, Chakmas and Marmas of Chittagong Hill Tracts and Barishal and the Bengali-speaking Buddhists of Chittagong) had started decreasing in terms of percentage. In undivided Bengal, Buddhist population-wise top four districts were Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), Chittagong, Darjeeling, and Jalpaiguri. While Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri (except the

territorial limits of five police stations) have remained with India, CHT and Chittagong have become parts of Bangladesh (former East Bengal/ East Pakistan). From the census data, it appears that the percentage of the Buddhist population in CHT was 78.19 % in 1951 which declined to 51.15% in 1981. Similarly, the Buddhist population of Chittagong decreased to 2.23% (1981) from 3.70% (1951). A similar trend has been noticed in the Bakherganj, Patuakhali, Comilla, Bandarban, and Barguna districts of Bangladesh.

Now, the question is “why has the Buddhist population declined in Bangladesh (former East Bengal/East Pakistan)?” A critical historical study would show that there were/are a few causative factors for the creation of such a trend. These are (i) insecurity and apprehension of persecution on the religious ground, (ii) economic deprivation and state policies, and (iii) conversion of the Buddhists into other religious faiths. The first one is a much-discussed causative factor of ‘partition-induced displacement’. Like other minorities, the Buddhists could not escape from the curse of the Partition. The second one was related to the settlement of the Muslim cultivators in the CHT with indirect ‘state support’ which increased the population of the non-Chakmas. The third factor was/is the conversion of the Buddhists to other religions. Here, we find the conversion of the Hill Buddhists into Christianity and Islam.

All these factors generated the forces of voluntary and forced migration of the Buddhists from East Pakistan/ East Bengal to India. Many of them had migrated to Mizoram, Tripura, and Arunachal Pradesh while a section of them took shelter in West Bengal. Since the Buddhists of Chittagong had a very good social connection with Kolkata (Calcutta) in the colonial period, many of them had voluntarily migrated to West Bengal.

## **Discussion**

### **The Bengali-speaking Buddhists of West Bengal**

West Bengal started its journey in 1947 with a very minor Buddhist population. According to the census of 1931, only the Darjeeling district had a noticeable Buddhist population [with a total of 58,943 (18.43%)]. And Jalpaiguri had a Buddhist population of 7,563 (0.76% of the total population of the district]. On the other hand, Calcutta and its adjacent regions had a few urban middle-class Buddhists before the partition. The Buddhist population of West Bengal is comprising of different ethnic communities including Nepali-speaking Buddhists (Tamnags, Gurungs, Lepchas), Tibetan Buddhists (Bhotias), and Bengali-speaking Buddhists (Mogs, Baruas, Chakmas, Marmas, Mrus, etc.). There is no separate enumeration of the Bengali-speaking Buddhists in the census report. So, it is a difficult task to enumerate the Buddhist population of West Bengal particularly those who have migrated from East Bengal either as voluntary or forced migrants. Since there is no sharp distinction between Hindus and Buddhists in appearance, language, food, dress, and cultural habits; in many cases, the census enumerators have recorded the Bengali-speaking Buddhists as Hindus. Common Buddhist citizens of West Bengal are not aware of this official disarrangement. According to the census 2011, the number of Buddhists living in West Bengal was about 2,83,000.

However, as per the available records, the Buddhist population of West Bengal would be around 3,00,000 to 4,00,000 (A. . Barua, 2013). The Bengali-speaking Buddhists are mainly concentrated in Kolkata, North 24 Parganas, South 24 Parganas, Nadia, Howrah, Hooghly, Bardhaman (East Bardhaman, and West Bardhaman), and Medinipur (East Medinipur, West Medinipur, and Jhargram) districts. Their number is very less in certain districts like North Dinajpur, South Dinajpur, Maldah, Murshidabad, Birbhum, Bankura, and Purulia. However, Bengali-speaking Buddhists have a considerable population in the Alipurduar, Jalpaiguri, and Darjeeling districts of northern West Bengal.

Our field survey data show that the Bengali Buddhists are not scattered throughout the above-mentioned districts.<sup>7</sup> In the case of Kolkata and its outskirts, the 'Bengali Buddhists' are mainly concentrated at Baubazar, Taltala, Behala, Garia, Tollygunge, Chetla, Alipore, Dum Dum Cantonment, Bandhavanagar, Tegharia, and Salt Lake City. They have a considerable concentration in Belgharia, Ichhapur, Sodepur, Dattapukur, Shyamnagar, Barrackpore, and Viveknagar of North 24 Parganas. In the case of South 24 Parganas district, we have found their population at Maheshtala, Rampur, and at Akra. They have a huge population at Satragachi and Belur of Howrah; Chakdah and Kalyani of Nadia; Bandel, Rishra, Polba, and Bhadreswar of Hooghly; and Durgapur, Burnpur, and Kalna of Bardhaman district. In the case of Jalpaiguri district, the Bengali-speaking Buddhists have main concentration at Maynaguri, Malbazar, Goyerkanta, Bagrakote, Nagrakata, Odlabari, Binnaguri, and Dumdum. On the other hand, in Alipurduar we have found their population at Hamiltonganj, Kalchini, and at Falakata. Though Nepali-speaking Buddhists and Tibetan Buddhists have huge concentration in Darjeeling, we have found the population of Bengali Buddhists in the Siliguri subdivision of that district.

It is a noticeable feature that after their migration to West Bengal, the Bengali-speaking Buddhists established their settlement in a particular area and named their villages/ locality as Baruapara (village of the Barua Buddhists) and Buddhapara (Buddhist village) in order to maintain their identity. Since the Bengali Buddhists prefer to live together as a community, they built up several Buddhist Viharas (monasteries) in West Bengal in the areas of their concentration. It is a cultural feature of the Chittagonian Buddhists that they maintain a close relationship with their Viharas.

In the case of the hilly regions of North Bengal, the Bengali Buddhists have built up several monasteries since 1920. It was started with the foundation of the Gandhamadan Bihar (Darjeeling) by Kripasarana Mahasthabir. After the Partition of Bengal (1947), Atul Sen Vikshu started organizing the Therabadi Buddhists of Jalpaiguri. He founded "Uttarbanga Bauddha Sanghashram" (in 1950) at Malbazar. It eventually appeared as a center of inspiration for the Buddhists of that region. Being inspired and induced by Uttar Banga Bauddha Sanghashram, the Buddhist of Nagrakata (Jalpaiguri district) founded Buddha Jayanti Bihar in 1956. It was followed by the establishment of the Buddhabharati Bihar (founded in 1963 in Siliguri). Another Buddhist Bihar was founded at Nagrakata in 1968 (under the guidance of Gnahotta Mahasthabir). This trend of the foundation of Buddhist Viharas was further maintained by the Buddhists of Jalpaiguri, Maynaguri, and Alipurduar. Altogether 20 Buddhist Viharas have been founded by the Bengali-

speaking Buddhists in North Bengal in the second half of the twentieth century (Alipurduar: 4, Jalpaiguri: 11, Darjeeling: 4, Cooch Behar: 1).

The Buddhist institutions of North Bengal are now being supervised by the Uttar Banga Bikkhu Parishad (North Bengali Bhikkhus Council founded in 1985). Simultaneously, North Bengal Buddhist Forum (1999) is working for establishing solidarity among the followers of *Mahajana* and *Therabadi* orders. On the other hand, the Tibetan Buddhists, after their migration to Darjeeling, Kalimpong, Karseong, and Alipurduar districts have started organizing themselves under different Buddhist temples and monasteries. Among them, the Mahajani Buddhist monasteries founded by the Tibetans and Tamangs are very much significant.

In the case of South Bengal, the number of institutions founded by the Bengali-speaking Buddhists is comparatively higher because of the close relationship between the East Bengali Buddhists and Calcutta and its suburbs. These organizations have been actively engaged in the propagation of Buddhist culture since the late nineteenth century. On the other hand, new migrants have founded several new Buddhist monasteries and temples within the territorial limits of Kolkata and the districts of Southern West Bengal. We have noticed more than fifty Buddhist monasteries and temples in Southern West Bengal built by the Bengali-speaking Buddhists after their migration from East Bengal (Kolkata: 15, North 24 Parganas: 13, South 24 Parganas: 6, Howrah: 3, Hooghly: 4, Medinipur: 2, Birbhum: 2, Bardhaman: 3, Nadia: 1). Among such organizations, 'Tollygunge Bouddha Samity' is a prominent one. It was founded in 1950. The Buddhists also established a Buddhist temple at Garia (Kolkata) in 1965 called 'Garia Buddha Mandir'. In the northern outskirts of Kolkata, they founded Dharmachakra Vihara (at Dumdum) in 1967. In 1975, Dharmasar Mahasthabir (a Buddhist monk) founded Vedarshan Siksha Kendra at Pottery Road in Kolkata. It is basically a center of Buddhist education. These newly founded Buddhist organizations have appeared as the markers of the Buddhist culture of West Bengal.

Apart from Kolkata, the Bengali-speaking Buddhists have also founded several Buddhist organizations in different districts of South Bengal. In this context, we may cite the examples of Buddhist organizations of North 24 Parganas and South 24 Parganas districts. We have noticed that the largest number of Buddhist temples and *viharas* (altogether 14) has been founded in North 24 Parganas district. These are mainly located at Dumdum, Barrackpore, Shyamnagar, Icchapur, Sodepur, Madhyamgram, and Duttapukur. There are a few notable Buddhist centres in South 24 Parganas like Maheshtala Bouddha Vihara (founded in 1968), Akra Buddha Samity (near Akra Railway Station), and Sakyamuni Vihara (founded in 1970). The Buddhists have also founded several other organizations in Howrah, West Medinipur, Hooghly, Nadia, Burdhaman, and Birbhum districts of southern West Bengal.

From our field survey data, it appears that most of the existing Buddhist monasteries/institutions of West Bengal have been built in the postcolonial period (since 1947). With the support of lay Buddhists, the Buddhist monks played the most significant role in the foundation of such temples and institutions in West Bengal. On many occasions, they took assistance from the larger Buddhist organizations of India as well as from other countries. The magnificent Buddhist temples of Satragachi (Howrah) and Malbazar (Jalpaiguri) are a few examples of

such initiatives.<sup>8</sup> It has also been noticed during our fieldwork that most of the Buddhist temples of West Bengal have improved their condition in the twenty-first century.<sup>9</sup>

It has also been noticed that the Bengali-speaking Scheduled Castes of West Bengal, after their conversion to Neo-Buddhism; have also come forward to set up their own organization (based on Buddhist ideologies). In this context, the Poundra Kshatriya Unnayan Parishad (1970), Champahati Ambedkar Samity (1988), Sudarban Ambedkar Samity (2001), Bharatiya Poundra Society (2006), and Poundra Mahasangha (2008) are quite active in the Sundarban Delta (Coastal West Bengal). At the same time, Mulnibashi Samity (2006) and Gautam Buddha Guidance Academy (2011) are engaged among the Poundras, Namasudras, Rajbanshis, Jalia Kaibartya, and other Scheduled Caste communities of West Bengal. These organizations are popularizing Buddhist social culture among the Scheduled Castes.

### **Cultural lives of the Bengali-speaking Buddhists**

The Buddhist monks and lay Buddhists of East Bengal origin are the followers of 'Theravada' (a traditional form of Buddhism. It is also known as *Hinayana*) though, in recent years, the Scheduled Castes of West Bengal have started embracing Navayana Buddhism. They carry the traditional culture that they have inherited from East Bengal. We may discuss their cultural lives under two separate heads namely – (i) community culture, and (ii) family culture. 'Community culture' refers to the celebration of community-based festivals or religious rituals in the Buddhist Viharas. And 'family culture' refers to the ceremonies or rituals they perform in their houses.

Since the Buddhist culture is closely associated with the Viharas, the Bengali Buddhists of West Bengal celebrate various cultural events at the monasteries/temples throughout the year (Choudhury, 2019). Most of their community-based festivals take place around the full moon nights. Just like the Bengali Hindus, they celebrate different full moons with great enthusiasm as per the Buddhist traditions. Among such cultural events '*Buddha Purnima*' (*Baisakhi Purnima*), '*Prabarana Purnima*', '*Kathin Chibar Daan*', etc. are celebrated in all Buddhists Viharas.

It has been noticed that '*Buddha Purnima*' (*Baishakhi Purnima*) is celebrated with the greatest grandeur. This day is considered to be the holiest one for the Buddhists because three great events of the Buddha's life [the birth of the Gautam Buddha (at Lumbini), the attainment of Buddhahood by Gautam (under the Bodhi tree at Bodhgaya) and the *Mahaparinirvana* (at Kushinara)] took place on the same full moon. On this day, every Buddhist family decorates their residence and the Buddha temples to their best capacity. They collectively offer prayer for 'world peace and for all beings, worship Buddha, and take a vow for undertaking and uphold '*Pancha Shila* (five precepts or principles of Buddhism). They pass the day with three basic concepts of Buddhism *Dana* (charity), *Shila* (precepts), and *Bhavana* (thought). On this occasion, the Buddhists organize a special discussion on Buddhism, its philosophy, and sermons in almost every Vihar (Choudhury, 2019).

Like *Baishakhi Purnima*, '*Ashadi Purnima*' (*Dharma Chakra Pravartana*) is also a special day for Bengali Buddhists. On that day, they collectively participate in

certain events like *Pindadaana*, embracing *Shila* and *Pradip Puja*. They also organize religious discussions and special discourses on Buddhism.

After the '*Ashadi Purnima*', the Buddhist monks generally confine themselves for three months in their respective monasteries and devote their time to study, teaching, and religious discussion. This tradition is known as *Barshabrata*. The *Barshabrata* ends with the '*Ashwini Purnima*' (full moon day of the month of *Ashwin* of the Bengali calendar). This '*Ashwini Purnima*' is also known as '*Prabarana Purnima*'. On this day, the monks do self-examination, i.e. they confess if they themselves have committed any misconduct during the rainy season and are cautious for the future. The lay Buddhist also follow '*Prabarana*' and take a vow to rectify their mistakes and to create an environment of harmony and unity by maintaining a friendship with all enemies and friends. In fact, '*Prabarana*' is a festival for strengthening community feelings, a festival of exchange of greetings. Besides, guardians of the Bengali Buddhist families inculcate their boys to follow the path of Buddha for their mental development. And in order to follow Buddhism, the boys are encouraged to stay in a Buddhist monastery as a '*sramana*' (the initial stage of a monk) (P. K. Barua, 2007).

The month-long '*Kathin Cheebar Daan*' festival starts the day after *Prabarana Purnima*. '*Cheebar*' is a cloth worn by monks. Generally, the monks who celebrate *Barshabrata* are given '*Kathin Cheebar*'. Since '*Kathin Cheebar Dan*' is a hard task and has to be completed within a month, not all Buddhist monasteries organize this festival. Rather, several Buddhist monasteries collectively organize this event. In that case, the monks of the nearby monasteries are invited and prominent monks of the Buddhist Sangha are present there. In front of the monks of the Sangha, the invited monks explain how they had observed the rainy season (*Barshabrata*). Those monks who follow the correct rules and observe the rainy season with purity and modesty are given '*Kathin Cheebar*'. It is to be noted that on the occasion of '*Kathin Chibar Daan*', Vihars are beautified as well as *Buddha Puja* (worshipping of Buddha) and *Dharamsabha* (discourse on religion) are organized in the Viharas.

Apart from the Vihara-centric festivals, the lay Therabadi Buddhists of Chittagonian origin maintain certain rituals and cultural traditions. Their family rituals from birth to death though rooted with the Buddhist traditions but in many cases, they have adopted the rituals of the Hindu traditions such as worshipping Hindu deities like *Lakshmi*, *Saraswati*, *Shiva*, *Kali (Tara)*, *Krishna*, etc. The married Buddhist women often wear *sankha* (conch cell bangle) and *sindur* (vermilion). However, the major rituals of their family-based culture are of course Buddha and Vihara-centric. In their daily life, they offer prayer to Buddha either in their family or at the nearby temples/ Viharas. Many Buddhists also bring the children to the Buddhist monastery on their birthdays and light a lamp in front of the Buddha and offer special food. They often invite Buddhist monks to their homes for blessing their children and recite the *Pancasila* and *Dhamma* precepts.

It is an interesting feature of the Buddhist marriage system that they avoid dowry (though in recent times, many Buddhist families have been induced to receive dowry for the marriage of their bridegrooms). They generally maintain the marriage relation within their own community though matrimonial relations with Hindu families are quite common at present. Since the Buddhists do not follow the caste and *gotra* system (descents from a common mythical ancestor among whom

marriage is prohibited) there is no restriction in marriage except close blood relation. Even there is no need for any priest. In the presence of a Buddhist monk, the marriage ceremony can be complemented by following certain rituals. The monks and other elderly members of the gathering bless the bride and bridegroom (Choudhury, 2019).

Bengali Buddhists do not consider corpses impure. They usually bathe the dead body and cover it with a white cloth and keep incensed candles lit in front of it. The cremation journey is not performed until close relatives and monks arrive. If possible they take the dead body to the nearest Buddhist monastery. Then the Buddhist monks read a short hymn about the impermanence of the world (Choudhury, 2019). Then they took the body to the crematorium. The funeral ceremony of the deceased is done within 1 to 7 days after the death of the person. In that case, there is no specific day. They complete the whole ritual within those days at their convenience.

Since both the family and community culture of the Buddhists of West Bengal are closely attached to the Buddhist temples and monasteries, it is desirable to have some ideas about the Buddhist monks of this state. Most of the existing Buddhist monasteries/institutions have their *Bhikkhus* (monks) and *Bhantes* (*Bhadantas* or Venerable monks) but there is a paucity of senior monks like *Thera* (*Sthabir*) or *Mahathhera* (*Mahasthabir*). Most of the monks of the Bengali Buddhists have their Chittagonian origin though many of them have come from Arunachal Pradesh, Tripura, and Mizoram (the descendants of the Chittagonian Buddhists/Buddhists of the Jumna Land).

The Bhikkhus have to lead their life by taking alms. In our fieldwork, we have noticed that the Bengali household Buddhists give alms and other items to the monks. Besides, they invite monks to various functions organized at their homes and give donations. Again, there is a good relationship between the monks and non-Buddhist people (especially Hindus).

The number of monks in West Bengal is very small in comparison to the population of Bengali Buddhists. It is very difficult to get monks for the Viharas established in different villages/towns of West Bengal. The Buddhist students and monks who are coming from Bangladesh to India for educational purposes are often encouraged to act as the monks of the Buddhist Vihara. On the other hand, the young generation of Bengali Buddhists of West Bengal is not showing their interest to become monks. In our fieldwork, we have also noticed that the knowledge of the Pali language (in which the Buddhist texts have been written) is limited mainly to the monks. On the other hand, the young generation of Buddhists of Southern Bengal is acquiring excellence in various sectors of education (other than Pali) and other professions. So a gap is being created between the demands of the Buddhist temples and the educational attainment of the youths. During our fieldwork, it has been observed that the primary purpose of the Buddhist Viharas (that have been built in various villages of West Bengal) is to fulfill the religious requirements of the Buddhists of the region. So the monks of these Viharas have expressed that the only way to overcome the shortage of the number of monks is to build their own educational institutions with high ideals (A. . Barua, 2013).

## Conclusion

There are basically three trends in Buddhism in contemporary West Bengal. Firstly: Tibetan Buddhism) is being popularised in the hilly regions of North Bengal by Tibetan migrants. They have mainly preserved the traditions of “Mahajana/ Kalchakrajana/Vajrajana”. Secondly: after their migration to West Bengal, the Bengali-speaking Buddhists have aspired to build up Buddhist Viharas, Sanghasrams, temples, and institutions in Kolkata, Sub-Himalayan West Bengal, and certain other districts of West Bengal. They have preserved and maintained the Buddhist socio-cultural traditions that they have inherited from the southeastern corner of former East Bengal. Thirdly: the publication and circulation of Buddhist literature have created awareness of Buddhism, especially among the Scheduled Castes communities of West Bengal. Several Scheduled Caste organizations have adopted the symbols of Buddhism in their organizations. Fourthly: many Viharas are suffering from a paucity of senior monks of the *Theravada* order. However, the Buddhist culture as well as the Buddhist institutions have substantial cultural significance. It is noteworthy that after 70 years of the partition of Bengal, the West Bengal Government has declared the ‘*Buddha Jayanti*’ as a ‘full-fledged State Holiday’ (February 17, 2017) which is of course one of the positive outcomes of dissemination of Buddhism in contemporary West Bengal.

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