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Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammasambuddhasa

Summary

This article provides a brief history of Buddhism in Bangladesh, in both ancient and present days. Historical evidence shows the ancient establishment of Buddhism in the third century BC; and reaches the golden age from the eighth to thirteenth centuries. The influence spreads to the neighbouring regions and extends as far as South East Asia.

Buddhism in Bangladesh has gone through different stages, and the present-day Buddhists, called "Barua", maintain the unbroken link with those ancient Buddhists.

Buddhism in Bangladesh

Condensed from an article in "The Bangladesh Observer", Monday 28th February 1983, by D. P. Barua.

Buddhism in Bangladesh has an ancient history, evidenced by numerous architectural monuments and archaeological sites where many images of Buddha and Bodhisattvas have been unearthed. Historical evidence shows that in the third century B.C., Bangladesh came under Buddhist influence when part of Ashoka's vast empire, and a number of Chinese pilgrims have left accounts of the religion flourishing there in those early centuries.

The Buddhist University Nalanda, which came into prominence in the sixth century, was patronized from Bengal, and headed by the illustrious Bhikkhu Shilabhadra, who had been born of a royal family of Dhaka.

From the eighth to thirteenth centuries, said to be the golden age of Bangladesh, Buddhism enjoyed royal patronage, and it influenced both religious and secular life there, generating new creativity in all spheres of culture and knowledge. Big monasteries were built and became centres of learning. The architectural pattern as far as the Borobudhur in Java, was influenced by such places. The ruins along the eleven-mile range of

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Mainamati-Lalmai hills speak of a flourishing Buddhist civilization at that time.

The greatest Buddhist centre on the sub-continent after the decline of Nalanda was Pandita Vihara, the major Tantric Mahayana School, near Chittagong. The famous saint and philosopher Atisha Dipankar Srijnan, and the scholar-monk Tilopa, who preached Buddhism in Bhutan, lived and studied in this Vihara.

Buddhism in Bangladesh had influence at that time far beyond its frontiers into South-east Asia, and the Bengali Atisha voyaged there to study and preach this religion. On his return he responded to an invitation to Tibet, where he revived Buddhism. He is the author of more than one hundred religious and philosophical books, and his influence reached far away into Mongolia, Korea and central Asia.

Bangladeshi literature owes its appearance, more than one thousand years ago, to the "Charyapadas", mystical songs full of Buddhist thought, and at that same time a remarkable school of art, comparable to the Gupta school, distinguished itself with the creation of Buddhist images in meditation.

The end of Buddhism in ancient Bangladesh is mainly attributed to its degeneration, lack of royal patronage, persecution by other forces in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, and absorption into the Shakti movement in the fourteenth. The surviving Siddhacharyas escaped into neighboring Nepal and Tibet, with their scriptures and literature, which were to greatly influence those countries. Only in this century has the discovery of Bengali Buddhist literature in those places revealed much of Buddhism in ancient Bangladesh. Buddhism became extinct in Bangladesh, although its ideals of equality and fraternity persisted for a very long time.

Buddhism in modern Bangladesh may be seven to eight hundred years old but appears unrelated to that which prevailed in ancient Bengal. The ancestors of present-day Buddhists are said to have emigrated from ancient Magadha (modern Bihar and Vajji region, Uttar Pradesh, India) following the militant emergence and resurgence of Brahmanism in the tenth and eleventh centuries.

In one of the longest journeys of ancient times, they first went to Assam, and finally to Chittagong, where they found a natural refuge between hills and sea. They rebuilt their religious and cultural base in keeping with their original tradition. The present-day Buddhists, called "Barua", maintain the unbroken link with those ancient Buddhists.

They were later joined there by surviving Buddhists from ancient central Bengal.

Buddhism has passed through various phases in Bangladesh. Contact with Burma and Sri Lanka, where Theravada Buddhism is practiced, has brought in new ideas, but the Barua community's overall situation among other religions has greatly influenced its social and religious life.