

CELEBRATING BUDDHA PURNIMA

A glimpse of Buddhism in ancient Bangladesh

D P BARUA

Lord Buddha visit Bengal during his life-time while he was preaching the Dharma walking long distances on foot in Magadha (present-day Bihar state of India), Uttar Pradesh and his birth place Kapilavastu in Nepal? Legends and a later-day Buddhist treatise named 'Bodhisattva Avadan Kalpalata' suggest that Buddha visited ancient Bengal probably along the river route of the Ganges. Historians, however, do not find authentic proof to support the view of his visit to this region. In any case Buddhism reached ancient Bangladesh shortly after his passing away.

The reign of Emperor Asoka, the Great is the most remarkable period in Buddhist history, under his royal patronage Buddhism took roots in the soil of entire Indian sub-continent. He built 84,000 Stupas or monuments throughout India and inscribed Buddha's messages in rock edicts, hills and mountains which defied time and exist till today. His emissaries preached the Dharma in Sri Lanka to the south, Afghanistan, Egypt and some other countries to the west, Siem (Thailand) and Burma (Myanmar) to south-east. Asoka's consecration to the throne took place 218 years after Buddha's passing away. Chinese pilgrim Fa Hien (359-415) during his visit to India in the Fifth Century came to ancient Bengal and found Buddhism in a flourishing condition through impact of Asoka's religious expedition. In the Seventh Century, the most outstanding traveller-pilgrim Hieun Tsang toured India for 16 years from 629 to 645 AD. While touring ancient Bengal he noted that Buddhism existed in Northern Bangladesh, Pundravardan and Mahastan, the first city of this ancient land. He visited Samatara region in 639 AD in present-day Comilla and recorded in his travel diary as having seen 30 Sangharams or monasteries here inhabited by 2000 monks of Theravada school.

In fact Buddhism is the original religion of Bangladesh for more than 2000 years and made deep impact on Bengali life, culture and civilisation through centuries in the midst of rise and fall of dynasties and kingdoms. Names of two devotees from Bengal, Dharmadatta and Rishinandan of Pundravardhan are inscribed in the entrance gate of Sanchi Stupa, constructed during Emperor Asoka's reign. The name 'Banga' appears in the stone inscrip-

tion of Nagarjunikonda dated Fourth Century BC.

From the Fourth Century AD the Gupta kings of ancient Bengal who professed Hinduism and the Vaisnava cult showed exemplary tolerance to Buddhism. Fa Hien in his travel diary during Gupta rule wrote that Buddhism and Hinduism coexisted in an atmosphere of peace and tolerance. The Gupta period was marked in ancient Bengal's history for remarkable excellence in religion, philosophy, literature, poetry, sculpture and paintings.

In the Seventh Century, Bhikkhu Shilabhadra, born in present-day Comilla was the most outstanding monk who became the Principal of then the biggest University of world, Nalanda. Hieun Tsang studied Yogashastra under him for two years and paid glowing tributes to his Master as the most profound scholar and philosopher of ancient India. Acharya Chandragomin of this period was known as an outstanding grammarian who wrote grammar deviating from the traditional Sanskrit vocabulary of Panini.

The Seventh Century in ancient Bangladesh was marked by total social anarchy, lawlessness and feuds among sections of people. This period continuing for more than half a century is described as 'Matsyanyaya' which means big fishes eating small fishes, implying oppression of the weak by the strong. Under the circumstances, the people elected a local chieftain named Gopala as their King in Eighth Century to bring about order and discipline in the society. Gopala is the founder of the Pala Dynasty who professed Buddhism and created a new social order based on justice and equality among all people. Nearly 400 years of the Pala Rule (850-1250) witnessed the birth of a new civilisation.

The First King of the Pala Dynasty, Gopala established Buddhist monasteries in different parts of the country. Famous Buddhist Philosopher Acharya Santarakshita visited Tibet and stayed there till 762 AD for reformation and regeneration of Buddhism. He is known as 'Pandita Bodhisattva' in Tibet. The Second Pala Emperor, Dharmapala was the founder of our 'Prajnaparamita Sutra' of Buddhism. He constructed 50 monasteries and founded the famous Vikramshila Vihara and Sompuri Vihara.

Buddhism created a rich culture and civilisation in ancient Bangladesh from Eighth to Thirteenth

Bengali language owes its origin to the work of Buddhist monks from the crust of prevailing Prakrit and Apabrahmsa language. In the year 1906 some ancient manuscripts lying buried in obscure chambers of monasteries in Nepal were discovered. They were found to be lyrics and songs written in an ancient form of Bengali language by monks known as 'Siddhacharyas'. Sitting in the monasteries of ancient Bengal from 10th to 13th Centuries, they created poetry in lyrical verses in a language spoken by the common folk which has come to be recognised as first ever germination of Bengali language.

Centuries. The compassionate teachings of the Buddha swept away discrimination among men in the society and generated a new spirit of equality, fraternity and humanism. During the Pala age there was a movement against caste discrimination. Poet Sarahapad composed songs and poems against the futility of caste system. Quoting Gautama Buddha's teachings, a poem said: 'If among the Brahmins, some engaged themselves in education and learning and led pure lives and if some others remain engaged in killing and theft, will the two types of Brahmins be placed in the same category?'

Buddhism emerged as the dominant religion of the masses and exercised profound influence on the social, cultural and intellectual lives of the people. During this period big monasteries like Vikramshila, Sompuri, Agrapuri, Kanakastupa, Jagaddala, Odantapuri etc flourished as centres of learning on Buddhism as well as secular arts and sciences. The most significant of these monasteries was Sompuri

and is described as the biggest monument south of the Himalayas. The architecture of this Vihara has influenced the style of monasteries in South East Asia up to Indonesia where monumental Borobudhur Temple of Java has been modelled after it. Archaeological excavations at Mainamati in the Comilla district led to the discovery of Salvana Vihara which constitutes the ruins of the historic Kanakastupa Vihara witnessed by Hieun Tsang.

One of the greatest centres of Buddhism in the sub-continent after the decline of Nalanda was Pandita Vihara located somewhere in Chittagong as the major establishment of the Tantric Mahayana school. Atish Dipankar Srijanan, the outstanding saint and philosopher and another scholar monk, Tilopa or Tilopad of Chittagong who had preached Buddhism in Bhutan studied in this Vihara.

Buddhist scholars and saints exercised their influence far beyond the frontiers of Bangladesh. Atish Dipankar Srijanan of Ten-Eleventh Century AD was one of the most

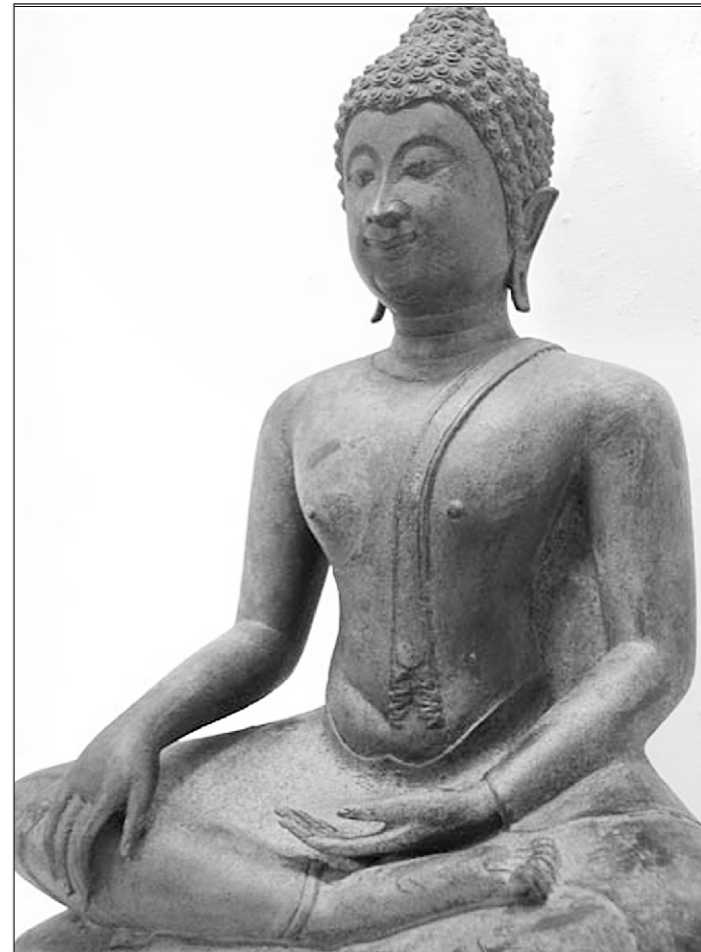
lived there for 13 years until his death at the age of 73. He wrote more than 100 religious and philosophical books on Buddhism which are preserved in ancient temples of Tibet. He is still worshipped in Tibet, China, Mongolia and northern Asian countries as the incarnation of Lord Buddha.

The period of Buddhist rule in ancient Bangladesh was marked by remarkable development in the style of architecture, arts and sculpture. The massive monasteries in Paharpur, Mainamati and Mahastangarh were built in Bengal style of architecture. Terracotta pieces in the walls exemplify development of secular arts reflecting life, nature and social scene of those days.

Sculptors chiselled out images of Buddha, Bodhisattvas and other deities in stone, bronze and other metals which are specimens of intricate style of workmanship. Numerous Buddha images in meditation, mainly in the Bhumisparasa Mudra or earth-touching attitude with Buddha's right hand touching the Mother Earth as witness to his

mankind with infinite compassion and vowing not to seek Nirvana for himself until all human beings are liberated from the bondage of sufferings.

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Lord Buddha

religious and social conservatism in the subsequent Sena Rule. At that declining stage of Buddhism, the Senas supporting the Brahminical doctrines came from south India and destroyed the social structure founded on equality of all people in the Pala Age. A sizeable number of Buddhist monks fled to Nepal and Tibet with their manuscripts and religious books while some others continued their existence here under various camouflages.

Subsequently a group of orthodox Buddhists from Magadha, Vajji and Vaishali of North India migrated to the Eastern regions to escape the rising tide of militant Brahminism there in the 13th-14th Century. They first came to Assam and then continued long journey to reach Chittagong where they found safe shelter merging with surviving Buddhists of ancient Bengal amidst geographical landscape of sea on one side and ranges of hills on the other. The newly-settled immigrants from Magadha lived for about two

centuries under Arakanese rule (1459 to 1666) when they adopted Theravada Buddhism. These Buddhists under ethnic nomenclature as Barua still uphold the ancient tradition and have taken advantage of English education in early 20th century during nearly 200 years of British colonial rule. They constitute a highly-educated middle class segment. Professor Benimadhav Barua (1888-1948) of the Calcutta University was the first D.Litt of the Indian sub-continent and Asia in 1917 from the London University. The tribal Buddhists of the Chittagong Hill Tracts are believed to be belonging to Burmese-Tibetan races with their own distinctive culture. Bangladesh is rooted to an age-old Buddhist culture and civilisation which is an integral part of national heritage of Bangladesh.

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Mainamati in eastern Bangladesh

Vihara whose massive ruins had been unearthed at Paharpur of Rajshahi district in northern part of Bangladesh by British archaeologists. Unique in ancient temple architecture, this Mahavihara developed during Pala Dynasty from the Eighth to Eleventh

centuries till Buddhist lyrics found logical fulfilment in the composition of 'Vaisnava Padabali'. The final disappearance of Buddhism in ancient Bangladesh is mainly attributed to the degeneration of Buddhism into obscure Tantric cults and also emergence of

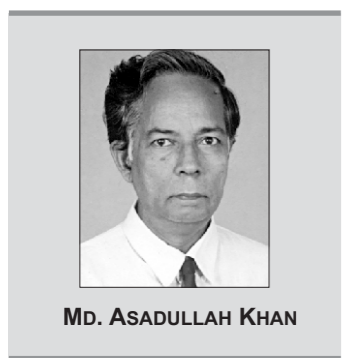


Paharpur in northern Bangladesh

attainment of Supreme Enlightenment in the face of Mara's onslaught were unearthed from beneath the soil. Among the Mahayana Tantric gods and goddesses, Avalokiteswar in particular inspired the artists who depicted him as the presiding Bodhisattva of the time looking upon

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Corruption eating into the vitals



MD. ASADULLAH KHAN

While speaking at the National Press Club recently, the Japanese Ambassador in Bangladesh stressed the need for fixing law and order to foster development and boost business in the country. While making no secret of the fact that the malfunction of the police necessitated the introduction of Rab that led to many extra-judicial killings, the envoy stressed further the need for improving governance, infrastructure and regulatory frameworks to achieve pro-people growth and development. Paradoxically, we have too much government but too little governance. Good governance means setting targets, achieving goals and delivering results while working with checks and balances. Precisely true the big talk in the country is endemic corruption at the corridors of power and business. Most plausibly one reason why we are no longer shocked by the unspeakable corruption of our officials and politicians is because we are forced to talk about corruption mostly in generic terms.

Businessmen who understand the nuances of corruption better than most people are forced into a conspiracy of silence that makes it impossible for them to admit publicly how much they pay to build a bridge, set up a factory, construct a hotel and to get a loan from a bank. In the job market the situation is horrendous. Allegations abound that for a teaching job in a primary school one has to pay one lakh taka as graft to the management board or, for that matter for a sub-inspector or sergeant level job in the police department the graft money as revealed by the incumbents shoots upto 3/4 times.

A hint of how rotten the system is comes when a person who on condition of absolute anonymity agrees to speak in more specific terms. I met such a person recently who worked abroad for some time and wanted to settle in the home country on a plot of land he got from

RAJUK on a foreign remittance quota. He prefaced his story by saying, "would you believe that it's worse than ever? Everyone is on the take at every level of government". He recently finished construction of his house and no sooner was it completed than an official of the tax department approached him with proposition. He was ready to negotiate the amount of taxes the home owner was obliged to pay but for a price. The tax of the house should be at least 60 thousand taka but if he

national aspirations. Obviously corruption has been institutionalised. Not reining in such scams is a political blunder and in the aftermath of such reports being published, the question of whether the government connived in such alleged scams has acquired importance. If we move to industrial sector and look at the daily transactions of business, the stories of corruption, graft and bribery may come up further chilling and more alarming. Reports have it that PDB has failed

to reduce theft of electricity even after installing GSM metering system in the industrial belts of Chittagong. By tampering the electric meter through breaking seals and inserting bypass meter these industries are depriving the government of the actual bill they are obliged to pay and all these dirty businesses are being carried out in collusion with corrupt engineers in PDB.

GSM system is a highly modern and scientifically advanced metering system equipped with sim card associated with a mobile phone. The modern and fax installed in the meter can send computerised signal to the office of the chief engineer and other monitoring system in case of any tampering. Report published in a Bangla newspaper on May 1 last revealed that the chief engineer of PDB Chittagong zone recently detected such tampering in Nazia Steel Re-rolling mill at dead of night and caught red handed a corrupt engineer helping the mill owner in such malpractice. Ostensibly, the state coffers deprived of the fund that may have gone in reconstructing the power sector as well as improving the hideous, unclean unplanned cities, towns and villages that deface the Bangladesh landscape.

Corruption runs rampant in the country. Its ways and means boggle the mind. Another interesting aspect of such stories relate to how long and complicated it still is to build anything in the country. I met a businessman recently who told me that it took more than three years to build a factory and at almost every stage there was someone's pocket to be lined. When it comes to corrup-

tion there really is a trickle down effect. Newspaper reports published on April 18 last indicated that a list of 235 "rororepati" high level customs officials has been prepared at the behest of the NBR with one official of the rank of member in NBR thrown out of service for amassing wealth disproportionate to his income.

True, the rot spreads from the lowest clerk to the highest echelon of the society and government. There is no point in overlooking this

collected as fees from customs houses, the return sheet submitted to the NBR showed the same as only Tk. 2.38 crore in three years. Strangely enough, all these fees collected were deposited in the MD's personal account. When questioned about the legality of keeping company fund in personal account, the MD hastened to say that all these were done with the honest intention of setting up schools and colleges with the interest derived from this fund.

Allowing the law to take its own course of action, people are constrained to conclude that rare is the case when a person guilty of such misconduct has been in a court of law and proper punishment meted out. People also view that the near fruitless endeavour to curb terrorism and looting of state properties in the country has mostly resulted from the interference of godfathers in the administration who receive their strength from political bosses.

Let us examine what is generally said in defence of the corrupt practices that continue to proliferate in whole country. "No action can be taken, we are told, because the ground reality is that officials take bribes to allow illegal activities..." They also take to provide legitimate services as anyone who has tried getting an electricity meter or telephone connection in Dhaka will tell you. This happens not just to ordinary citizens in the country but even to privileged, important people who can pick up a telephone and ring the highest official in the land.

We need to begin by taking some punitive action against such officials. We need also to reduce the powers that our officials enjoy by making our laws simpler and more citizen-friendly. Corruption has corroded not just our whole system of governance but the very soul of Bangladesh. The problem has assumed enormous proportions. But if the government with sufficient political will does not attempt dramatic change soon, then not only will we continue to be counted among the most corrupt countries in the world but the administration will increasingly be seen by the common people as their enemy.

The report further says that against 174 crore taka that was

collected as fees from customs houses, the return sheet submitted to the NBR showed the same as only Tk. 2.38 crore in three years. Strangely enough, all these fees collected were deposited in the MD's personal account. When questioned about the legality of keeping company fund in personal account, the MD hastened to say that all these were done with the honest intention of setting up schools and colleges with the interest derived from this fund.

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NPT poised to fall apart

DR. LIAQUAT ALI KHAN

Recognising "the devastation that would be visited upon all mankind by a nuclear war," the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) was designed to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons. The NPT, which is now 35 years old, has succeeded to the extent that nearly 190 states have subscribed to it. Despite its grandiose universality, however, here are five reasons why the NPT is poised to fall apart in the near future.

1. The NPT nuclear club has been broken into. In 1970, the Treaty divided the world into two camps: haves and have-nots. It acknowledged that five states US, UK, France, Russia, and China lawfully possessed nuclear weapons. It hoped that the rest of the world would not acquire them. That did not happen. In 1998, India and Pakistan detonated nuclear weapons in face of the world. The US now publicly admits that Israel possesses nuclear weapons. Probability dictates that North Korea has them too. The dilemma is therefore insurmountable. If the club of five is expanded to eight and perhaps more, proliferation would

seem to have been accommodated. If not, the club would be treated as a foolish anomaly. Either way, the NPT is in legal disarray.

2. The NPT can be lawfully dumped. It allows a signatory state to withdraw from the non-proliferation regime "if it decides that extraordinary events, related to the subject matter of this Treaty, have jeopardized the supreme interests of its country." All that is required is a three months advance notice. North Korea joined the NPT in 1985. In January, 2003, however, it withdrew from the Treaty (effective immediately). If North Korea detonates the bomb and joins the de facto club, the NPT would be further weakened. And the dumping rule will be reaffirmed in international law. As luck would have it, there will be new withdrawals from the NPT, most likely in the Middle East where states will not accept Israel's regional nuclear monopoly. Even one or two more withdrawals will kill the Treaty.

3. The NPT's foundational promise is not kept. The five declared nuclear-weapon states promised to cease the nuclear arms race and head toward a complete nuclear disarmament under strict and effective international control. The collapse of the Soviet Union was a godsend that ceased the

superpowers' nuclear arms race. But no good faith effort, as the Treaty requires, is being made towards complete nuclear disarmament. In fact, contrary to the letter and spirit of the NPT, the Bush administration is actively considering to develop brand new nuclear bunker-buster weapons. No treaty regime can succeed on such blatant contempt for the world. When the shepherd on the white horse loses his way, no sheep come home.

4. The NPT is a double-headed monster. It is simultaneously good and evil. The Treaty allows the development of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes. In fact, the Treaty rests on a bargain. States relinquished the right to have nuclear weapons because they were led to believe that "peaceful applications of nuclear explosions will be made available" to them. Iran that signed the NPT claims that it has "the unalienable right" to develop peaceful nuclear energy. The United States claims that if Iran is allowed to acquire nuclear technology, it would come closer to developing nuclear weapons. Both claims are simultaneously accurate. This double-headedness is precisely the inherent flaw of the NPT. Its one head spews light, the other flames.

5. The NPT is a suicide pact. The US foreign policy has created a global context in which it is far more protective for states to have nuclear weapons than not to have them. The war on Iraq demonstrates that a state without weapons of mass destruction is vulnerable to invasion and occupation. It would be perfectly logical to conclude that Iraq was attacked, not because it had weapons of mass destruction, but because it had none. This pathological logic will be further confirmed if the United States continues to pursue diplomacy with North Korea that presumably have both nuclear weapons and missiles to deliver them. The Iraq/North Korea binary reality resurrects old truths that "might is right" and "be firm with the bullies." And so, in a dangerous world, adhering to the NPT will be considered foolish.

For these five reasons, the NPT seems no longer viable. If the analysis above is dark and pessimistic, and something can indeed be done about the weapons of mass destruction, beware, more wars and "the devastation that would be visited upon all mankind" might be on the way. A complete nuclear disarmament is, of course, another possible solution.

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