

# History in Religious Performances: A Case Study of Bengal and Odissa

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**Abstract:** Buddhism, as an elaborate religious belief, was the first religious connection established with Bengal. Under the four centuries of the Buddhist rulers (8th to 12th century C.E.), it acquired the patronage needed. Some parts of Bengal and Orissa, therefore, experienced the creation of a religious ground for Buddhism based on Tantracism. The merger of regional deities and the amalgamation of different religious and cultural faiths in the Bengal region were the reasons for the slow intervention of Hinduism in the early medieval period. This paper attempts to study the resultant changes in prominent religious practices, their purpose in society, and their development. It will also problematize the issue of interconnectedness among several religious performances to understand their origin and significance. This paper will also discuss the changes in the genre of literature and the historical understanding of the changing circumstances in which the text or parallel texts were composed and performed.

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## 1. Introduction

In the history of Indian culture, spirituality, and intellect had an important base as an ultimate source of knowledge. Vedic texts essentially formed the foundation for everything that evolved into a complex socio-religious phenomenon in India.<sup>lv</sup> J. Gonda believed that the wide range of customs and beliefs in many of the cultural provinces of India, as well as in many of the perspectives on historical events and relationships, demonstrate the awareness of continuity. Modern orthodox faiths assert that an early religious legacy persists, modified, purified, and tailored to meet the needs of succeeding generations. This idea of continuity with responsible factors has been explained by Maurice Phillip in his book 'Evolution of Hinduism', where he has discussed in detail the stages of the advancement of Hinduism. In his text, Maurice has emphasized various Indian philosophies and their contribution to Hinduism, giving it a wider and more compounded religious shape.<sup>lvi</sup> According to him, there was a disintegration of Vedism as well as a reaction of Brahmanism to the influence of Buddhism.<sup>lvii</sup> So the change in the religious process was both due to internal and external factors. In historiography too, there is an emphasis on how Buddhism had a larger impact on religious ideas and their process of change. With the advent of new philosophies and a significant amount of external influence, there was a process of intermingling and amalgamation of different cultural ideas. This process included indigenous cults and practices, and a transition of religious ideas took place with the help of regional culture and language.<sup>lviii</sup>

## 2. Religious traditions in Early Medieval Bengal

Bengal in the post-Gupta phase had a greater influence of the Buddhist Tantra on social groups and gender.<sup>lix</sup> This can be helpful to understand the later developments of writings and religious beliefs in Bengal. Given the significant influence of

Buddhism, the compositions of Puranas and Upapuranas in Bengali became crucial for intentional homogenization.<sup>lx</sup> Quoting M.N. Srinivas, Kunal Chakrabarti mentions the social aspects of Sanskritization as both facilitating social mobility and the process of cultural integration.<sup>lxi</sup> Defining it as a tradition involving the mutual interaction of dominant and local cultures, it has been further defined as a two-dimensional interaction where the dominant had its sociocultural influence on the local tradition, and the local traditions were also providing content for its amalgamation with the dominant one.<sup>lxii</sup>

Another important aspect of studying religious perspectives in the past is the study of religious patronage through charters or grants. In this context, examining copper plate charters of a specific rule aids in comprehending the patronage that a ruling class provides. The study of the nature of religious patronage and its transition within a period helps us understand an existing religious process and its recipients. It also helps in understanding the different practices that developed around such religious patterns. Studying these texts specifically can justify the impact of such patronage on the religious writings and literary culture of the period. The earlier works on ancient Indian charters or land grants addressed many of these aspects, specifically discussing their impact on society and state formations.<sup>lxiii</sup> Later research incorporated the study of its impact on other aspects of society. A very important field of study that benefited from it is religious study because the study of a charter or land grant for a particular region also defines the nature of the patronage given to the recipients.<sup>lxiv</sup>

### **3. Political background and religious developments**

By examining it through the lens of previous literature, we can discern a persistent change in the character of religious patronage. The religious patronage during the

transitional phase of Bengal had a direct and indirect involvement of the ruling or subordinate class. The ruling class had little to do with the religious faith of their dynasty.<sup>lxv</sup> However, the pattern of religious patronage to the donee under the Pāla and Sena rule is different from the earlier rulers. The Pala and Sena experienced a notable difference from the Gupta rulers, who issued land grants through local administrative officers under the king. During this time, the majority of the donors were local rulers, and the recipients were brāhmanas who immigrated from other regions. In south-east and south-west Bengal, there was a similar pattern in the sixth and seventh centuries records, where almost all the land grants were by the subordinate chiefs in favour of brāhmanas as recipients.<sup>lxvi</sup> During Pala rule, we find a gradual shift of donors from subordinate chiefs to the king themselves. The beneficiaries, or donee, were the individual brāhmanas; according to records, almost all of them were emigrants of other grama. The ruling class needed this particular situation to legitimize their rule. To attain this, brāhmanas were brought and given grants. So, the shift in patronage was to gain the legitimacy of the subjects and establish control over different regions.<sup>lxvii</sup>

This has also been defined as Pala's religious pluralism, an attitude of inclusiveness where all Hindu beliefs were given respect.<sup>lxviii</sup> Early Buddhist rulers of the Pala dynasty specifically gave charters and land grants to Vihara or Viharika (Buddhist monasteries) that they individually built. Charter records indicate that monasteries and temples in North Bengal initially received land grants between the eighth and twelfth centuries, with the donors hailing from the subordinate class. Further, the data on land grants shows that after the rule of Gopala II, there was a shift in religious patronage where both the donors and the recipients changed. The king becomes the donor, and the emigrant individual brāhmanas becomes the recipient.<sup>lxix</sup> The land grant records of Sena rulers of the north, western, central, and southern

parts of Bengal had a similar nature of religious patronage, where almost all the land grants were by the king to the emigrant brāhmanas.<sup>lxx</sup> It was the religious and social culture of Bengal before the establishment of Brahmanism and their pluralistic religious attitude that was responsible for their survival in the later phase.<sup>lxxi</sup> During Pala rule, there was inter-religious harmony, and the indigenous people and Buddhism lived harmoniously. This flexibility and the religious-social culture emerging out of it were the reasons why Pala rulers were chosen and continued for many centuries.<sup>lxxii</sup>

#### 4. Religious Writings in Bengal

The religious belief that emerged around the god Dharma in Bengal is bound to a limited role and does not invade the cosmic evolution and dissolution process.<sup>lxxiii</sup> Since Buddhism, as an elaborate religious belief, was the first religious connection established with Bengal, under the four centuries of the Buddhist rulers, it acquired the patronage needed. So, from the 10th century C.E. onwards and till the 12th century C.E., some parts of Bengal experienced the creation of a religious ground based on Mahāyāna and Hīnayāna Buddhism. Later, Hīnayāna belief gained a liberal outlook, and from the 10th century onwards, it gained an esoteric influence, which helped in the development of ideas based on Tantra. The new thoughts and beliefs based on Tantracism are Vajrayāna, Kalchakrayāna, and Sahajayāna. Out of these, Vajrayāna and Sahajayāna belonged to Bengal.<sup>lxxiv</sup>

The Pala rulers gave patronage to Bengali literature and numerous genres of writings emerged in Bengal. The Charyapada, written between the 8th and 12th centuries by the Siddhacharyas, or the teachers of the mystic are considered as initial development of the Bengali literary culture. It focuses on the esoteric doctrine, yogic theories, and Sahjayana practices.<sup>lxxv</sup> The liturgical texts *Sūnyapurān* and *Dharmapujavidhān* of Ramai Pandit were written in early medieval Bengal. In these writings god is described as formless, stainless, supreme, and the creator of all.<sup>lxxvi</sup> These texts narrate the story

of a supreme god Dharma Thakur who is also mentioned as Nirajana. The first text, *Sūnyapuran*, is dedicated to the worship of Dharma Thakur (also known as Dharmaraj and Dharma), a Hindu deity of death and justice. Worshipped in Bengal as a special village god, Dharma Thakur has some similarities with the later Buddhist religious ideologies. The second text, *Dharmapujavidhān*, is more on the Dharma worship and its association with Shaivism and Vaishnavism. There are numerous references to covering deities which includes almost all the Hindu gods and goddesses.

#### 4.1 Religious Performances in Bengal

##### Gājan

Gājan<sup>lxxvii</sup> is an important religious festival in Bengal. It is celebrated for twelve days preceding Visuvat, the spring equinox, during the dark fortnight of Chaitra (the month of March or April). This festival is in praise of Dharma Thakur, who is associated with fertility and healing among the lower caste, the Doms.<sup>lxxviii</sup> The image of God is identified with sila, a black round stone with metallic eyes, and equally important are the terracotta animal figurines used in the worship. Before the performance, all the participants accept the clan of Dharma. This ceremony of acceptance is termed gotra dharan. All the participants who accept the gotra of Dharma Thakur follow the prescribed food habits and clothes during the festival. This phase of religious ceremony for the one who accepts the clan of Dharma is called sanyās, and the performers are called sanyasi.<sup>lxxix</sup> It includes a copper ceremony (tamra sanskār), as mentioned in the liturgical text, *Sūnya Puranā*.

Aadya anaday devi noilen sthiti |

Jatha hoite pandit hoilo upasthiti || 1

Man pawan kalpana maya |

Aadi anadi Niranjan aadyakaya || 2

(*Sūnya Puranā*, p. 136)

These lines are in the chapter Ath Tamra Dharan. It narrates the process of the copper ceremony to include one and all who disclaim fantasy and desire and purify their minds. The poem mentions the process of converting a devotee into the clan of Dharma and the participation of all five priests to control and relieve the feelings of desire, attachment, and illusion in the devotee.

Apawitra tamrake pawitra ke kelo |

Bisai Boliya gosain honkar padilo ||4

Aasiyat wishwakarma dilo darshan |

Aagya koro gosain kono prayojan ||5

Sun bacha Wishwakarma bhoger gua khaye |

Chari wanner tamra gathan kori dey ||6

(Sunya Puran, p. 116)

For the purification of the tamra, god Vishwakarma<sup>lxxx</sup> appears and performs the smelting (tamra sanskār). At this point, the officiant proceeds with a series of invocations followed by the formulas of the dejāsi, who call Dharma in chorus to attract him.<sup>lxxxi</sup> This purification process is still in continuity, where the copper bracelet or ring is offered as a rite of passage to conversion.<sup>lxxxii</sup> This is followed by Khelā (games), also mentioned in the text, Sūnya Puranā. This game includes a procession and the piercing of body parts with metal arrows or vegetable fibers. It is similar to the reference to self-sacrifice mentioned earlier, where, to please Dharma Thakur and for the blessings of offspring and victory, Ranjabati and her son Lausen performed it. The most important part of the festival is the carak puja (hook swinging). In this puja, the sanyasis hang themselves by piercing their skin through metal hooks and swinging their bodies from a platform suspended on a pole called a carak gāch. There is a reference to marā khela too, but it doesn't appear to be confirmed in any ritual manual.<sup>lxxxiii</sup> With time, we find some changes in the religious ceremonies

where the object of worship is in continuity but the process of religious performance has changed. Many of the processes not mentioned in the text were put into practice, which justifies the transition in the religious process.

There has always been a connection between the story of Sristi Patan in *Sūnya Puranā* and the religious performance of *Gājan*. In the fifth part of the chapter, after the birth of Brahma, Vishnu, and Siva, all three gods dedicate themselves to asceticism when Dharmaraj meets them in the form of a corpse. After their birth, all three gods were without eyes and were sitting in meditation for the auspicious sight of their deity, Dharma. Floating on water, the corpse form of god Dharma reached Brahma and Vishnu, who unknowingly let it float in the water. Later, the corpse reached Siva, who recognized him and was blessed with three eyes, Trilochana. With the gift of sight, Siva sang in praise of Dharmaraj and requested that he bless his brothers with the blessings of sight. Dharmaraj, after blessing all of them, turned toward Adyasakti. He says that being of the female gender, she will conceive all the living beings, and Siva (Mahesh) will marry her in her next life.

He *rūpe* kara chisti kahi ji tumhare |

Mahesh Kariba bibhā janma janmāntare ||221

(*Sūnya Puranā*, p. 22)

Supreme gave the responsibility of the world to four of them and then sat on *Ulluk*(bahan or vehicle) and remained suspended in the void.

Chari janāa sristi bhār dila parātpar |

*Ullūk āsane* rahu *sūnyar* upar ||224

(*Sūnya Puranā*, p. 22)

In the text, *Sūnya Puranā*, we can see a shift of worship from Dharma to Saiva observance. In the mangal kavya literature, there is a reference to the marriage of Siva,

and in the Gājan, he is worshipped as a ploughman deity. In Gājan, Siva is linked with the fertility cycle of the earth. Gājan represents what is shared and common among the people of the same land, ignoring their caste and status.<sup>lxxxiv</sup> It is an act of mass participation based on the worship of the ānchal god, Dharma. Mass participation and religious performance are crucial components in the study of the local areas. It is based on stage performances dedicated to the glory of a religious cult where performers, through their religious acts, prey on the health, economic well-being, and happiness of the entire community.

### **Charakpuja; Mara Khela in Bengal**

The performances at the end of Gajan called the 'dance of the death', mara khela (playing with the corpses). This practice emerged around the worship of Dharma Thakur, gradually shifted to the worship of lord Shiva. This shift with the efforts to bind the practice in sastric perceptions is quite evident from the text 'Dharmapuja Vidhan'. The language and the pattern of writing with the use of chalit bhasha (modern Bengali), suggests indicates the impact and imposition of the dominant culture on the tribble or local culture.<sup>lxxxv</sup> The practice of playing with the corpses is considered as an essential act to please Dharma Thakur and the performers perform it with dissatisfaction because of administrative restrictions implemented for hygiene reasons.<sup>lxxxvi</sup> The belief developed around it considers it an act to please the ultimate or supreme god for the welfare of the society. It is also believed that these performances with the help of the dummies, instead of the act of self-sacrifice, conducted nowadays are done just to fulfil religious responsibility. The common belief is that such offerings are accepted only when these are performed with real corpses. The performers seek the urgency of these acts in real form during natural disasters and the set of beliefs that has developed around agricultural practices considers that during the time of famine and drought, it is necessary to perform that act in its real form to ease the society from the fear of the sacred.<sup>lxxxvii</sup>

## Gaudiya Vaishnavism in Bengal

Vaishnavism in Bengal is associated with Chaitanya Prabhu, born in Navadwip in 1485.<sup>lxxxviii</sup> In his early life, Chaitanya was inspired by Ishwara Puri in Gaya and got motivated towards spirituality. Ishwara Puri was a Buddhist monk of Madhav Sampradaya. His ideas helped Chaitanya become an emotional mystic.

The first sprout of the desire tree of devotion was manifested in the person of Shri Madhavendra Puri, and that sprout developed into a sapling in the person of Shri Ishwara Puri. Then, in the person of Shri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, who was also a gardener himself, the sapling became the trunk of an enormous tree—the desire tree of devotion

(Chaitanya Charitamrita Adi, 9. 10–11)

The beginning of ‘Samkirtana’, where the name of Lord Krishna (Incarnation of Vishnu) was chanted with singing and dancing, was the assertion of the public right of freedom for divine worship.<sup>lxxxix</sup> After receiving his spiritual teachings, Chaitanya took on the responsibility of religious teaching and established a Sanskrit school called ‘tol’ in Nawadwip.<sup>xc</sup>

After accepting *sannyasa* and renouncing the pleasures of life, Chaitanya started sermonizing the religious belief of Krishna bhakti and developed his idea of Vaishnavism. This later consolidated the philosophy of Achintya-bheda bhed vada, the association of Chaitanya with Madhva, and his philosophy with ‘Sampradaya’. From the 10th to the 12th centuries, there is a change in the story of Krishna, where, from an incarnation of god, Krishna becomes god himself, and his worship develops on the belief in a final union with god through passion.<sup>xcii</sup> Final union, or embracing beloved and renouncing material aspects, is the core belief and symbolizes one’s ignorance of social existence and disregard of norms of morality.<sup>xciii</sup> Love for

Krishna elevates a romantic union to a divine aspect, arousing the faith of Vaishnavism and serving as a path to salvation.<sup>xciii</sup> The component of parakiya, love for other women or married women, emphasizes the denial of everything that comes between the ultimate union. This idea of love and union provided a new platform for religious belief, spiritualism, and a corpus of cultural and religious pursuits in Bengal.

## 4.2 Religious Practices in Orissa

### Satya-pir

In Orissa, in the southeast corner of the Jagannath, the image of Vishnu, who holds a conch, a wheel, a club, and a lotus, is worshipped as Satyanarayan. To attract the masses here, only the name has been changed. The popularity of Satya-Pir in Orissa might have been exploited in this way in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The entire story of the birth of Satya-Pir is described in the Skanda Purana and the pala<sup>xciv</sup> of Srikavi Pandit, Sitaram Das, and Kavikarna. People accepted Satyanarayan as one of the Trinaths. Later on, he was identified as Jagannath. This is purely to enhance the glory of Satya-Pir.<sup>7</sup>

In the Orissa state Gazetteer, it has been recorded that diverse forms of ballad singing originated in Bengal and spread to Orissa during the 17th-century Muslim rule. This phenomenon is closely linked to Satya-Pir, a cult that may have been established to promote Hindu-Muslim unity. Kavi Karnapura has written sixteen palas for the efficacy of worshipping Satya-Pir, each with different stories. It is true that after the puja, the pala is sung by a band of singers and musicians. The band uses mridanga and symbols as accompanying instruments. Gradually, it got rooted in the soil of Orissa. Medieval Oriya musical poetry entered its domain, making it more literary than musical. Here music and poetry got married, while in its original form, it remained associated with the worship of Satya-Pir with the singing of Bengali pala.

### **Pancha Sakha Dharma and Mohimā Dharma in Orissa**

With the assimilation of the later Tantric beliefs of Buddhism and Vaishnavism (Gaudiya), the Sahajiya cult of Vaishnavism emerged as Pancha Saktā in Bengal and Alekha Mahima Dharma (Fig.3,4) in Odisha.

Nāgāntak Vedāntak Yogāntak jete |

Nānāproti Vidhire Kohile toi chite ||

Goraksanathanka vidya viransinha Ajna |

Mallikanathanka yoga Bauli pratijna ||

Lohidas kapilanka saksimantra jete |

Kahile je jemanta se hoichhi gupte ||

(Sūnya-Samhita, Ch-X)

These lines of Sūnya Samhita, written by Santakabi Achutananada Das in the Odiya language, narrates the secret existence of later Buddhist schools, including 'Nagantak' following Nagarjuna, Vedantak, and Yogantak or Yogacharya.<sup>xcv</sup> Though practiced in a hidden form, all the sects mentioned in this text represent the tantric philosophy in Orissa during the sixteenth century. The acceptance of this belief was due to the esoteric practices of devotion responsible for the massive interest among the common population.<sup>xcvi</sup> Other writings also mentioned the popular worship of the Panch Dhyani Buddhas in Odisha during this period.<sup>xcvii</sup>

During the rule of Prataparudra<sup>xcviii</sup>, Chaitanya visited the temple of Jagannath in Orissa<sup>xcix</sup> and settled in Puri for the rest of his life. In the final eighteen years of his life, Chaitanya fortified the Vaishnav belief in Puri, and his intense devotion and religious ecstasy solidified his image as the incarnation of Lord Jagannath.<sup>c</sup> This entire development can be kept congruent with the religious developments of the

local cults of Bengal. A similarity of persecution, suppression, and transition toward the Vaishnav religion is quite evident with the continuity of the earlier religious credence. The result was the robust Vaishnavite movement, which developed around Lord Jagannath.

The Panch Sakha cult developed around the devotional poetry of five illustrious Vaishnav poets in Orissa. Achyutanand Das, Balram Das, Jagannath Das, Ananta Das, and Yasovanta Das sang the glories of Krishna.<sup>ci</sup> The works of Achyutanand, Balram, and Jagannath are of high emotional spirituality. *Sūnya Samhita*, *Gupta Gita*, *Siddhanya Dambari*, *Vishnugarbha Purana*, *Dharma Gita*, and *Stuti Bhajans* are the important writings on *Sūnyata* and the theory of the void's incarnation. Achyutananda had numerous influences from Gurus, and he developed his belief in *Sūnya*, the attributeless supreme god. After pilgrimage to sacred places, he returned to Puri and, with four of his contemporaries, initiated the new religious movement. The new movement resulted from the merger of the spiritual practices of Vaishnavism, Buddhism, and Tantricism.<sup>cii</sup>

Mohima Dharma was a religious belief founded by Mukund Das, also known as Mohima Swami or Gosain. A saint of Brahmin origin with the influence of Buddhism, Mukund Das, helped in the emergence of this belief in Orissa in the late nineteenth century. It is an obscure religious belief against idol worship. It propagated the idea of a formless indigenous god.<sup>ciii</sup> A belief based on the idea of complete submission to Alekh Brahma for the transmigration of the soul became a popular faith among the common man of Orissa.<sup>civ</sup>

## 5 Conclusion

In all the religious performances of medieval Bengal and Orissa, there were some similarities and continuities with the early medieval religious texts written in Bengali. All the religious practices were based on a similar pattern i.e. the worship

of local deities, specifically of the Dharma cult, revered by peasants and lower working classes. However, there were important variations too. In the early medieval period *Upapurana-Sūnyapurān* written in Bengali, there were stories of Dharma Thakur and religious performances of Gajan, Charakpuja and Mara khela were based on them. In these performances, the idea of the supremacy of Dharma Thakur over all other Puranic Gods and Goddesses was evident. This remained the case during the Pala rule when the donors were regional heads and the donees were the religious centers. During the Sena rule, however, the rulers became the donors and donees were those Brahmins who were brought in from other regions. This change impacted the socio-religious arrangements which was reflected in the individual renditions of the religious performances. They exhibited the changed circumstances of their creation. A similar tendency can be seen in the religious performances of Orissa too, where the idea of the supreme deity gradually shifted to the religious performances praising Shaivism and Vaishnavism. The earlier practices that had developed here were Gaudiyā Vaishnavism, Satya pir, Panchasakha, and Mahima Dharma. *Dharmapujavidhān*, as a religious text, exemplifies this shift since it was written in praise of Hindu Gods and Goddesses. It showed the influence and acceptance of the dominant Brahmanical religious writings on the lower classes.

With time, it can be reasonably said, that the older and more widely known texts were modified and used in regional religious performances. During this transmission, the religious practices of Bengal and Orissa underwent change. The performers used the texts with some additions and not surprisingly, applied the simplified versions of the complex verses of early medieval Bengali literary texts.

