Chapter V

Concluding Observations

What Asoka and Kanishka did for Buddhism in earlier days was done by the members of the illustrious Pala dynasty of Eastern India. Indeed, the mantle of Asoka and Kanishka fell on the Pala rulers in this respect and as Paramasaggatas they not only kept the religion of the Master alive but contributed to its spread to distant lands. Prior to their emergence in the middle of the eighth century Bengal and Bihar (Gauda-Vanga and Magadha) were pre-eminently under the spell of Brahmanism, in spite of the fact that many places of Bihar provided the platform to the religion of Buddha. At least we have no positive evidence at our disposal at present to suggest that Buddhism was ever in the ascendant in the Bengal-Bihar region in the pre-Pala period. Yuan Chwang includes, however, some late members of the Paramabhaagavata Gupta dynasty, like Sakrāditya (generally identified with Kumāragupta I) and Vālāditya (most probably Narasimhagupta Vālāditya), in his list of royal patrons of the mahāvihāra of Nālandā. Apparently this reflects a liberal attitude of the said Gupta rulers towards Buddhism, but the motive for such liberality and generous assistance towards Nālandā may be better explained by the fact that by the
time of Sākrāditya, Buddhist monasteries of the type of Nālandā had developed as centres of learning and by patronising such monastic-cum-academic establishments the above-noted Gupta rulers were rendering a service more to the cause of learning than to the cause of Buddhism. The two outstanding royal figures in the post-Gupta-pre-Pāla period were Harshavardhana and Āsāṅka. Of them the former had a distinct predilection for Buddhism, but the latter was a devoted Śaiva. So long Āsāṅka was alive, Buddhism could not enjoy much progress in Bengal and Bihar. It was only after his death that Harshavardhana got hold over the western portion of Āsāṅka's kingdom, while the eastern sector went to the hands of the Kāmarūpa king, Bhāskaravarman. In any case in the first half of the seventh century Buddhism failed to become a major religion in the Kāsauvara kingdom of Āsāṅka, roughly corresponding to the Murshidabad district and its adjoining regions. In East and South-east Bengal, i.e., Samatā-Vaṅgāla region, however, Buddhism got a congenial home, where Buddhist dynasties like the Khaṇgas and Devas professed the religion of Buddha. Interestingly enough, it was this area where Buddhism was firmly rooted and had almost an uninterrupted and longer lease of life. Even now there are a good number of Buddhists in Chittagong and Hill Chittagong.
The Pālas, as indicated above, were ardent devotees of Buddha and they expressed and called themselves as Paramasaugatas in their own epigraphic records. It was natural for them, therefore, to extend their patronage to the faith they professed. They appear to have done this by building mahāvibhūras like Odantapura, Somapura and Vikramāsilā, which became noted centres of Buddhist learning and culture. It is interesting, however, that so far as their land grants are concerned, the maximum number of donees were adherents of Brahmanism. That the Brahmin kings also reciprocated the attitude of the Pālas has been borne out: for instance, Samalavarman, though a Vaishnava, granted land either to a temple of the Buddhist goddess Prajñāpāramitā or to a Buddhist devotee named Bhīmadeva as a reward for his recital of the Prajñāpāramitā text. The phenomenon evidently shows that the Pālas followed the age-old tradition of religious catholicity and by doing so they presumably created a good impression on the non-Buddhists. The members of contemporary minor royal dynasties tooed in this respect the line of the Pālas, the most distinguished of such dynasties being the Chandras of Vanga-Samata. In other words in consequence of this policy of religious toleration of the Pālas and their contemporaries both Buddhism and Brahmanical religion were flourishing side by side in an atmosphere of peace and harmony.
In fact, in Eastern India, or for that matter in other parts of India, in various ages these two religions seldom came in conflict with each other and their adherents not only exchanged their views and ideas among themselves, but also adopted many of the rites and rituals connected with respective faiths. Events like the dip in the holy water of Gokarṇa by Dharmapāla, the religious suicide by Rāmapāla in the sacred Ganges and the taking of his bath in the river Ganges at Benares by Lādahāchandra furnish, inter alia, some illustrations on the point. That the Brahmin rulers also esteemed Buddhism and its rites and customs is testified to by the land-grant of the Vaishnava king Sāmalavarman of the Varmā dynasty. If Chitrāṭikā, the queen-consort of Madanapāla considered the act of listening to the recital of the Mahābhārata as pious and meritorious, the Varmā king also seems to have looked upon the reading of the Buddhist text Brahmaprāmita as no less meritorious than that of the Great Epic of the Hindus. In any case, the royal patronage was extended to Buddhism and Brahmanism alike and the peace and harmony between the followers of these two religions was the expected result.

As the major rulers of the period under review (c.750 – c.1200 A.D.) professed Buddhism, it is but natural that the promotion of art and culture during their reign-period would be linked with their faith and belief. In
other words, it is not difficult to discern the Buddhist inspiration in the art and culture during the Pala epoch. The mahāvihāras of this age of the stature of Nalanda, Vikramasila and Somapura used to function as present-day Universities. The fame of these seminaries of learning went beyond their geographical borders and used to attract students and teachers of distant lands. One fact, however, deserves attention in this context. In the pre-Pala period the list of foreign students and teachers of the University of Nalanda included eminent Chinese intellect-workers like Fa-hsien and Yuan Chwang. This Sino-Indian intercourse appears to have been petering out on the Chinese side by the middle of the eighth century; China was now replaced by Tibet in cultural intercourse with India. The academic and cultural exchange missions between Eastern India and Tibet seemingly went on in full swing till the last days of the Pālas.

With the expansion of the academic fame of Nalanda, Somapura and Vikramasila were disseminated the styles of art and architecture closely associated with these monastic establishments. The most illustrative case in this context

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1. In one of the last batches of Tibetan monk-scholars came one Dharmasvami. He visited Eastern India in 1234-36. He was appointed a dvarapala of Vikramasila. See Roerich's Biography of Dharmasvami.
has been furnished by the colossal temple at Paharpur, the site of ancient Somapura. The temple-type², as revealed by this monument, profoundly influenced the architectural efforts of South-east Asia, especially Burma and Java. Apart from the Paharpur temple, some now-lost temple-types surviving in manuscript-illustrations, are seen to have borne close affinities with some South-east Asian, particularly a number of Burmese, temples. Similarly, the school of sculpture which flourished during the ascendancy of the Pālas and Chandras, while was distinguished from other contemporary schools by the qualities of ornamentation and sensuous modelling, came to exercise influence on the sculptures produced in South-east Asian countries. The discovery of terracotta plaques with representations of Arakenese and Burmese men and women at Mainameti, indicative of close connection between Burma-Arakan and Samatā (present-day Comilla district), may also be recalled here.

No less interesting is the result of researches in the doctrines of branches of Buddhism of this period, such as Mantrayāna, Tantrayāna-Vajrayāna, Kālacakrāyāna and Sabajayāna. A discussion of these branches or systems,

² Recent excavations at Salban Vihāra has disclosed a similar kind of temple, although less ambitious in proportions.
as made in preceding pages (Chapter IV), has revealed that Buddhism during this period was considerably adulterated by the Tantric cult and its magic spells and practices. This is attested by Taranātha, according to whom, 'from the ninth to the eleventh century yoga and magic were paramount in Buddhism'. The sponsors and exponents of the Tantrayāna-Vajrayāna-Sahajayāna systems, known as Siddhas (corresponding to Acharyas of earlier Mahāyāna out of which these systems evolved) brought about not only many significant doctrinal changes, but also enlarged the Buddhist pantheon with numerous hitherto unknown deities, placing all of them in a full-fledged icono-conceptual hierarchy. As in the case of the impact of Buddhist art-idiom of the period on the architectural and sculptural styles of South-east Asian countries, so in the sphere of metaphysics and theology these later forms of Buddhism reoriented Buddhism of countries like Tibet, China and Japan. The Tibetan Lamaism, the Chinese Ch'an and the Japanese Zen Buddhism bear the deep imprint of Buddhism of the Pala culture-epoch. And if this Buddhism has lengthened the life of the religion of the

3. Winternitz observes that Taranātha's 'Statement is probably not far from the truth'. History of Indian Literature, Vol. II, p. 399.
Master in those countries, it has contributed considerably to its decay and decline in the land of its birth.