INTRODUCTION

The period of the Pālas of Bengal constitutes a significant chapter in the history of early mediaeval India. The dynasty was not only a long-lived one, but it also gave to India an era of many-sided development in the fields of religion and creative activity during its existence of nearly four centuries. It started its career in what is now known as Bengal and Bihar about the middle of the eighth century and shortly carved out an empire of pan-Indian importance. The Paramasaura dynasty of this dynasty gave a longer lease of life to Buddhism in the land of its birth by patronising it in every possible way and also worked for its propagation in Nepal, Tibet and South-East Asian countries. In this respect they were followed by a few other minor Buddhist dynasties like the Devas and Chandras, whose activities were mainly confined to the area they had been ruling. It was during this period again that Indian art and culture accompanied Buddhism to the above-noted neighbouring countries and exercised abiding influence on their art and culture. The history of Buddhism of this period, therefore, deserves a more intensive study than what has been done so far.

The sources of the history of Buddhism of this period are divisible into two categories: archaeological and literary. The combined testimony of these two types of sources has enabled us to reconstruct this history.
The archaeological source consists of epigraphical, numismatic and glyptic, and monumental records. The epigraphs or inscriptions on stone or metal relevant to our period are numerous and their evidence is noteworthy. The land grants issued by the Pala monarchs or those belonging to their reign not only describe them as devout Buddhists (Paramasaugata) but also indicate the nature and extent of patronage they extended to the religion of the Master. At the same time these epigraphs spell out the catholicity of the Pales towards other religions. The Khalimpur inscription of Dharmapāla, for instance, records his endowment of land for the worship of the Brahmanical god, Nanna-Nārāyaṇas. The Monghyr copper-plate of his son, Devapāla, further informs us that Dharmapāla also followed the rules of caste as laid down in the scriptures. Like their husbands, the Pala queens were also respectful to the Brahmanical faith and customs. The Manaballa Grant of Madanapāla states that Chitramatīka, the chief queen of this monarch, regarded the listening to the recital of the Mahābhārata as a meritorious act. That the religious factor did not vitally affect the contemporary politics will be attested by the Badal pillar inscription according to which a Brahmāya, Garga, was appointed as the minister of Dharmapāla and Garga's descendants occupied the post for several generations. From the epigraphical records again indication is obtained about the
significant role played by Bengal in the international sphere of Buddhism. The Nalanda copper-plate of Devapāla, dated about the middle of the ninth century A.D., records that it was at the request of Bālaputradeva, king of Suvarnadvīpa, that the Pāla monarch granted five villages for the upkeep of the monastery which that foreign ruler built at Nalanda on the approval of Devapala. Knowledge of doctrinal aspects of Buddhism is also enriched by inscriptions. Thus the oldest reference to Sahajiyā or Sahajayāna, a later offshoot of Mahāyāna Buddhism, is found in an inscription of the 13th century; the Mainamati plate of Rāvanaṅkamalla Harikāladeva of the present-day Comilla district speaks of "a superior officer of the royal groom(?) as practising the Sahajadharma in Pattikeraka in the said region (sahajadharmanu karmasu). Reference to a Mahāyāna sect, styled Avalvartika sanga, in the Comilla area is met with in a pre-Pala record, viz., the Gunaighar Grant of Vainyagupta, dated 509 A.D.

As a source of early Indian history coins and seals come next to epigraphs in point of importance. But so far as our period is concerned, coins have practically come to no help, since both the illustrious dynasties, the Palas and the Senas, are not known to have issued any coin. Similarly no coin is yet attributable to the minor royal
dynasties of the period like the Devas and the Chandras. A few coins of Rasika and Samsharadova are, however, contextually important, since they indicate the predominance of Brahmanical religion in the pre-Pala Bengal. Compared to coins, seals have been proved to be of adequate help. It is on the basis of the seals discovered at Rajbadonga near the Chiruti Railway Station in the Murshidabad district that the location of Narmawora, which was a flourishing centre of Buddhism in the sixth-seventh century A.D., has been settled with certainty.

Similarly, the sites of the Buddhist Universities of Malanda and Somapura have been ascertained by the seals, among other antiquities, recovered from the ruins at relevant places.

The monumental evidence in the present context can hardly be over-emphasized. The ruins of the aforementioned Buddhist monasteries of Malanda and Somapura bear, inter alia, a glowing testimony to the flourishing state of Buddhist religion and learning. Numerous stone and metal images of divinities of the Mahayana-Vajrayana pantheon of our period, found in Bengal and Bihar (ancient Cauda-Vagadha kingdom) eloquently speak of the popularity of Buddhism among the royal members and plebeian masses. These images are understandably valuable for the study of the growth and development of Buddhism in general and
Buddhist iconography in particular. Apart from the sculptures, painted illustrations of Buddhist deities borne by several manuscripts, belonging to the collections here and abroad, have not only helped the students of Buddhist iconography, but have also supplied significant evidence of the pictorial art that was practised in Bengal in the early mediaeval period. Some of the illustrated manuscripts bear representations (along with descriptive labels) of Tārā of Chandradvīpa, Chundā of Pattikera and Lokarātha of Harikala and it thus appears that stone or metal images of these deities enshrined in respective areas earned fame all over Bengal, not only among the Buddhists, but perhaps also among members of other religious creeds. Similarly, the influence of Buddhist monument at Paharpur on South-East Asian architecture (e.g., Chandi Loro-Jongrang and Chandi Sewu in Java, and Ananda temple at Pagan) has been brought out by a comparative study of the relevant examples. Likewise, the affinity between Bengal (i.e., Gauda-Magadha) and several South-East Asian sculptures is not far to seek.

Literary source, usually corroborative in nature, has occasionally appeared as of independent and immense value in the context of the history of Buddhism in Bengal. In several cases indigenous (Sanskrit) and foreign (Chinese, Nepalese and Tibetan) texts have supplied us valuable information, which are otherwise unknown. Thus the offshoots
of Mahāyāna Buddhism like Sahajayāna and Kālachakrayāna would have remained to us names only but for the discovery of a large number of manuscripts, mostly hailing from Nepal. The stages of the transformation of Mahāyāna into the mystic forms, generally designated as Vajrayāna and Tantrayāna (more specifically Sahajayāna and Kālachakrayāna) and the account of the preceptors of these sects (who flourished some time between the tenth and twelfth centuries) have indeed come to our knowledge mostly from the manuscript materials. Literary texts, notably the Tibetan, have not only given us details about the celebrated Buddhist Universities of the stature of Nalanda, Vikramāsila and Somapura, but have also informed us about the existence of many other Buddhist centres of learning like Tralshula, Devikota, Pulabari, Patthakara and Jagaddala. Chinese travelogues of Fa-hien, Huen-Tsang and I-tsing have left for us pen-pictures of the condition of Buddhism in the pre-Pala period. For instance, all these accounts bespeak the pre-eminence of Tamralipta as a noted centre of Buddhist studies from the time of Fa-hien till the close of the seventh century A.D. as well as the flourishing condition of Buddhism during the said period. Details about the introduction of Buddhism in Tibet from Bengal in the seventh century and its influence on the evolution of the culture of
Tibet are also known from literary texts, chiefly from the Tibetan. Thus the Tibetan literature credits the Bengali savant Dipankara Srijñana (also known as Atīśa) with the religious movement in Tibet and whatever is known of this great intellect is derived mainly from the Tibetan tradition.

In short, Buddhism held a predominant position in the Gauda-Magadha kingdom during the period of the Pala monarchs and it enjoyed the same position in the neighbouring countries of South-east Asia. This salient fact of the history of our period has been brought out by the close and integrated study of the archaeological and literary sources as noted above.

In the course of our investigation all possible sources in the shape of epigraphical records, archaeological monuments, icons and paintings and literary texts and traditions belonging to our period have been explored and items of information gathered from them have been logically pieced together for the portrayal of Buddhism which flourished during the reigns of the Palas and their contemporaries. As the following pages will indicate, knowledge gaps in the history of this religion are still there, yet no pains have been spared to bridge them with
the help of the relevant data-bank. In other words, an attempt has been made for the first time in our dissertation to present Buddhism of the Pāla culture-epoch in its proper perspective, though we do not claim to have uttered the final word on this interesting and significant subject.