

## ABSTRACT

Archaeological investigations in undivided Bengal through the centuries have laid bare sufficient accumulations of archaeological evidence to indicate that Buddhism was an organised religion in this part of the country, at least from the time of the later Mauryas, if not from the days of Aśoka himself. The mahāsthān inscription (if we accept the view that the Chhavaggiya bhikshus, mentioned in the inscription, refer to a Buddhist sect) points to the fact that quite a number of individuals and groups were already been attracted towards the faith and its monastic order as early as the third century B.C. Besides, it is also clear from the archaeological materials recovered from different parts of Bengal that the religion had a continuous existence from the third century B.C. to roughly thirteenth century A.D. if not later. Historically speaking the religion was slowly and steadily gaining a new momentum all over Bengal from the Gupta period onwards. To my mind the study of this religion insofar as Bengal is concerned is very important since it is found that while Buddhism in other parts of India was slowly losing its ground, it not only became consolidated in this part of the country but continued in a different channel as substratum of other religion until recently. Indeed, the vaishnava sahajiyā movement of Bengal is a parallel movement

of Buddhist sahajiyā̄ cult.

This dissertation aims to study the history of Buddhism and Buddhist Art in Bengal in evolutionary sequence from the earliest period to the thirteenth century A.D. The first three chapters have dealt with the historical evolution of this religion of the eastern region with special emphasis on Bengal. We have tried in these chapters to unfold the main stages of development in the context of the respective social forces working as background history. An attempt has been made to examine the reasons why Buddhism easily reached in the heartland of this region, and continued for such a long time in diverse forms leading to the rise of a number of sectarian groups.

The fourth chapter makes an attempt to reconstruct the structural activities of the Buddhists. The study of this chapter has been advanced by the increasing discoveries of Buddhist establishments. But unfortunately due to the lack of scientific technical information the excavated materials could not be used always meaningfully. But inspite of this limitation, there is no doubt that in following the traditional pattern of Buddhist architecture, Bengal seems to have contributed a type of its own. The present enquiry aims to bring out this regional form.

The fifth and sixth chapters deal with the extant images, their artistic and iconographic analysis. Interestingly from the artistic point of view Bengal has yielded two

distinct trends of style, at times prevailing simultaneously. Iconographically the images, however, have followed the usual text-based forms, found elsewhere in eastern India, especially at Nālandā.

Lastly, I have added a short catalogue of Buddhist icons preserved in the Indian Museum, the Asutosh Museum of Indian Art, the Museum of the state Directorate of Archaeology in Calcutta and the Maldah Museum in Maldah.