

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

The present thesis is not a study of Buddhist art and iconography in itself. It proposes to produce a research monograph on Buddhism and Buddhist Art in Bengal. Attempts have been made to find the infra-structure of Buddhist History in Bengal, from the earliest period to about the thirteenth century A.D. From the accumulated archaeological evidences it appears that the religion had a continuous existence in Bengal from the third century B.C. to the thirteenth century A.D., if not later. Historically speaking from the Gupta period onwards it slowly and steadily gained a new momentum all over Bengal. Under the Parama-gaungata pālas it succeeded to establish its strongholds in this part of the country. By this time there were numerous celebrated monasteries manned by eminent Buddhist teachers. But what happened to this religion despite unquestionable organisational strength behind it? Very soon it sank into oblivion, leaving a faint survival among the tribal people in the fringe area of Bengal. The real cause of this change seems to be the changing structural set up of Buddhism which was caused because of the lack of a central organisational control.

Whatever could have been the early stage of Buddhism in Bengal, it is found that Buddhist creed slowly and steadily came under the influence of Mahāyāna Buddhism. In fact the

religion practised by the Pāla kings shows Mahāyāna trend from the very beginning. This Buddhism appears to have been completely different from the Buddhism of the earlier period. The ancient schools like sammatīya or sarvāstivāda are no longer spoken of in this part of the country. The religion now developed forms of mysticism - known as vajrayāna and tantrayāna, the leaders of which are celebrated in Buddhist tradition as siddhas, who were supposed to be eighty-four in number. This mystic Buddhism is said to have assumed three important forms :- vajrayana, sahaṣṭayāna and kālachakrayāna. In Bengal mystic Buddhism became so popular that subsequently this became the substratum of Buddhist religion of later days. It is interesting to notice that during the tenth-twelfth century A.D. period there were a few Buddhist monasteries in Bengal in which only a handful of sophisticated intellectuals of the earlier order were engaged in formulating the subtlest logic to prove the unreality of the world. The general trend was to practice religious rites and rituals necessary for attainment of worldly requirements through mystical means. These conditions led to the emergence of numerous flexible systems. Unfortunately we have limited data which can throw light on this changing phases of Buddhism. But we have evidence to indicate that in Bengal a large number of monasteries namely, the somapura, Traikutaka, Devikoṭa, paṇḍita, sonnagara, phullahāri, paṭṭikeraka, vikrampurī and jagaddala grew up in the Gupta-post Gupta period.

During the last few decades a number of important excavations and explorations have been carried out in Bengal yielding a large number of monasteries and Buddhist deities. These have opened new ways for fresh study of history of Buddhism in this part of the country. This study has been based primarily on the archaeological discoveries with due attention to relevant literary materials. It has been observed in course of my work that Buddhism in Bengal though followed in general the norm and tradition of Buddhism of eastern India, it had a local and regional expression. This is evident if one studies critically the Buddhist sculptures and monuments found from different parts of Bengal. An attempt is, therefore, made to appreciate the historical process of Buddhism as has been manifested itself in this region. The dissertation proposes to study somewhat thoroughly the structural characteristics of the Buddhist monuments and the stylistic and iconographical features of the Buddhist icons in stone, metal castings, stucco, terracotta and paintings in the perspective of their respective sources.