CHAPTER VII
RELIGIOUS ECLECTICISM

A close scrutiny of the material in the early Bengal epigraphs reveals that the society enjoyed to a considerable extent religious eclecticism. As noticed in the previous Chapters, sometimes Buddhist kings are found offering donation to the Brāhmaṇas or the Vaiṣṇava or Śaiva kings are looking after Buddhist monasteries. Sometimes commoners of one faith are also seen paying respect to other faith than their own, as has been pointed out by Samaresh Bandyopadhyay. The eclectic attitude as revealed by early Bengal epigraphs will be treated by us in two different sections, the first one dealing with eclectic attitude of the commoners and the second one with eclectic attitude of the kings. Some such inscriptions are referred to here chronologically as many of such inscriptions have been discussed in the earlier Chapters, especially in Chapter VI (pages 306, 307, 309, 310 and 312).

SECTION I
ECLECTIC ATTITUDE OF THE COMMONERS

1) Samaresh Bandyopadhyay has pointed out\(^1\) that inscriptions throwing light on the eclectic attitude of the common man are exceedingly interesting. The Jagadîśpur copper-plate inscription\(^2\) of the Gupta year 128 (447 A.D.) records the donation of three common men for a vihāra, a vihārikā and a Sun-temple at a time. Bandyopadhyay has further suggested that if the person named Bhoyila in the Jagadîśpur plate who was probably devoted to both the Buddha and the Sun-god, and Bhoyila of the Baigrām copper-plate inscription\(^3\) of the Gupta year 128 devoted to Govindasvāmin, are taken as identical, then “Bhoyila, besides being devoted to both the Buddha and the Sun-god was also devoted to Govindasvāmin” and “the epigraphs reveal the religious liberality or eclectic attitude of the people of the period.”

2) In this context he has also cited\(^4\) the example of the Pāhāḍpur copper-plate inscription\(^5\) of the Gupta year 159 (479 A.D.) which records the purchase of land by the Brāhmaṇa Nāthaśarman and his wife Rāmi, for the benefit of Jain vihāra of Vaṭagohālī. Regarding eclecticism of the commoners, Bandyopadhyay has dealt with the material available in Bengal inscriptions of the Gupta period. In some of the inscriptions of the later period also, we notice eclectic attitude of the commoners.

During the reign of Buddhist Pāla rulers of Bengal we find that a large number of images of different deities are gifted by the common men and sometimes by the women of the society which have been discussed above in details in the sections of the inscribed images of Chapter I.

We mention here five more inscriptions bearing evidence for eclectic attitude of the commoners.

\(^{1}\) Ibid., p. 99.
\(^{3}\) R. G. Basak in ibid., Vol. XXI, pp. 81-82.
\(^{5}\) K. N. Diksit in Ep. Ind., Vol XX, pp. 59 ff.
3) The Ghosrawā stone-slab inscription of Devapāla tells about a person Viradeva, born of a Brāhmaṇa family who adopted the teachings of Sugata and was elected by the Saṅgha to preside over the monasteries at Nālanda.

4) The Mandhuk stone image of Gaṇeśa belonging to the 1st regnal year of Gopāla II was gifted by a merchant named Jambhalamitra. According to D. C. Sircar the man was a Buddhist who installed a Brāhmaṇical god to keep his promise (mānat).

5) A metal inscribed image of Umā-Maheśvara belonging to the 31st or 32nd regnal year of Rājyapāla was a gift of a lady named Mūlakā, the wife of Mahiaru, a resident of the Āpanaka monastery.

6) The Nārāyanpur image of Gaṇeśa belonging to the 4th regnal year of Mahipāla I was installed by the merchant Buddhamitra, the son of Jambhalamitra. D. C. Sircar observes that these merchants originally followed Buddhism and it is not even improbable that the merchant Jambhalamitra mentioned in both the Mandhuk and Nārāyanpur inscription is the same person. Later he remarks that the donor of the Nārāyanpur Vināyaka image could belong to Brāhmaṇical religion also.

Early Bengal inscriptions reveal a growing sense of unity between the two different sects of Brāhmaṇical religions — Vaiṣṇavism and Śaivism as is discussed above in Chapter I, Section IA.

7) The Kamauli copper-plate inscription describes the learned and heroic person Vaidyadeva (who was initially the minister of Kumārapāla-Verse 9) as both parama-maheśvara and parama-vaiṣṇava mahārājādhirāja (Line 47).

---

SECTION II

ECLECTIC ATTITUDE OF THE KINGS

In a note of one of his Presidential Addresses Samaresh Bandyopadhyay draws\(^1\) our attention to the Guṇāighar copper-plate inscription of Vainyagupta recording the grant of land in favour of Buddhist monks and vihāra. and exhibiting eclectic attitude of the king of the Gupta period since he was dealing with material available in the Gupta records. In subsequent period also the eclectic attitude of the kings is noticed in a large number of epigraphs.

1) The Kailān copper-plate of Vaiṣṇava king Śrīdhāraṇarāṭa shows that on the request of his minister of war and peace (mahāsāndhi-vigrahika), Jayanātha, the king granted land for worshipping Buddha and for making provision for the necessities of Ārya-saṅgha (Buddhist monks) as well as of a number of learned Brāhmaṇas for performing pañcamahāyajña. D. C. Sircar remarks\(^2\) that the reverence of Jayanātha for both the Buddhists and the Brāhmaṇas represents the religious atmosphere of Bengal in the 7th century A.D. Although the Brāhmaṇical and Buddhist philosophers were busy in refuting one another's views, mutual understanding among the lay-men marked absolute religious toleration.

2) The inscription issued by the Khadgas (Buddhists in faith) bear a recumbent bull, a symbol of Śiva.

3) The Deulbādi image inscription\(^3\) informs that the Buddhist king Devakhaḍga covered the image of goddess Sarvāṇī with gold.

---

1. 'Seminar on Early Bengal Epigraphy and Cultural Life', Abhivādana, p. 90, n. 2.
4) The Nidhanpur copper-plate inscription\(^1\) of Bhāskaravarman praises Mahādeva in Verse 2 and Dharma, the second of the three jewels of Buddhists (tri-ratna) in Verse 3, though the dynasty’s lineage is claimed as from Naraka (son of Viṣṇu).

It is to be noted here that many of the epigraphs of the Buddhist Pāla rulers are ideal examples of liberal attitude of the kings, showing respect to religions other than Buddhism. Some of such inscriptions are referred to here.

5) The Bodhgaya stone inscription\(^2\) of Dharmapāla records that Keśava, the son of sculptor Ujjvala set up an image of Mahādeva for the spiritual benefit of the Mallas of Mahābodhi. It may be mentioned here that Bodhīgaya (or Mahābodhi) was an important seat of Buddhist religion. Moreover the king himself was a believer of that religion. But he did not hurt the sentiments of his subjects by raising any objection.

6) The copper-plate charter\(^3\) of Śūrapāla I of his regnal year 3 records that “of the four gift villages two were granted in favour of the god Māhateśvara installed by queen mother at Varāṇasi and other two in favour of the parśad of Śaiva-ācāryas.” In this inscription we notice that different religious faiths are mentioned with great respect. Verse 5 justifies the name of Dharmapāla as the defender of dharma which is described as true faith (i.e. Buddhism) and again as dharma of Rāma or of Śambhu or of Viṣṇu. The verse expresses that “although Dharmapāla was a follower of Buddhist pacifism, to his enemies he was a terrible fighter like Rāma, Śiva and Viṣṇu.”\(^4\)

7) The undated Bhāturiyā stone inscription\(^5\) of the time of Rājyapāla records the building of a Śiva temple and its Verse 12 states that the king Rājyapāla dedicated a village in favour of god Śiva installed by Yaśodāsa, a common man who became an administrative officer of Rājyapāla (Verses 6 and 7).

---

1. P. N. Bhattacharya in *ibid.*, Vol. XII, pp. 65 ff.
8) Line 38 of the Bhagalpur copper-plate inscription\(^1\) of Nārāyaṇapāla describes that the king himself constructed thousands of Śiva temples (svayam-kārita-sahasrāyatana). (The details have been discussed in Chapter I, Section II (A) Śiva).

9) The undated Siyān inscription\(^2\) of the time of Nayapāla refers to different religious faiths, mostly of Śaiva and a few of Vaiṣṇava, Śākta, Gāṇapatya and Saura religious establishments (discussed in details in Chapter I, section II (A) Śiva).

10) From the Manahali inscription\(^3\) of Madanapāla we come to know that the Parama-saugata king made a gift of land to a Brāhmaṇa as a fee for reciting the Mahābhārata (Lines 43-45).

D. C. Sircar draws our attention\(^4\) to the interesting fact that “most of the grants were made by the Pāla kings after taking bath in the Meters of the Ganges.”

Not only the Pālas but also other kings of medieval Bengal were tuned with the same note of eclecticism.

11) The Irda Plate\(^5\) and the Kālāndā plate\(^6\) of the 13th and 14th regnal years of Kamboja king Nayapāla open with salutation to Śiva, but the seals bear Buddhistic emblem.

In a number of inscriptions of the kings of Candra dynasty of Bengal we find that the kings show liberal attitude towards other religions than their own, even they themselves perform Brāhmanical rituals.

---

12) The Rāmpāl charter\(^1\) and the Dhillā charter\(^2\) of Śrīcandra record grant of land in favour of Brāhmaṇas who performed Brāhmaṇical rituals and the land was granted in the name of Buddha (discussed in details in Chapter VI, p. 311).

13) Verse 16 and 17 and the Maināmati charters\(^3\) of Laḍahacandra record that the king visited Vārāṇasī like Hindu pilgrims.

14) The undated Chittagong copper-plate inscription\(^4\) of Kāntideva states that Buddhist Dhanadatta married a devout Śaiva princes and had profound knowledge in the epic and in the purāṇas. His son Kāntideva, a follower of Buddha used a seal of combined emblem of the lion and the snake, representing Buddhism and Śaivism.

15) The Vajrayogini inscription\(^5\) of Sāmalavarman records a land grant of the king in favour of a Buddhist temple to please his patron deity Viṣṇu.

16) The Rākṣaskhāli copper-plate\(^6\) of Dommanapāla of Pūrvakhaṭikā pays adoration to bhagavān Nārāyaṇa, though the king is described as parama-māheśvara.

17) The Śobhārāmpur copper-plate\(^7\) of Dāmodaradeva records the grant of land in favour of Brāhmaṇas on the request of the Buddhist minister Goutamadatta (discussed in chapter VI, p. 315). The epigraphs of the Sena rulers of Bengal reveal that the earlier kings Vijayasena and Vallālasena were followers of Śaivism, Lakṣmaṇasena opted for Vaiśṇavism and Śūryasena and Viṣvarūpasena were described as parama-saura. But the seals attached to the inscriptions bear the traditional emblem of Sadasiva.

The above discussion reveals that early Bengal epigraphs bear ample evidence to make us believe that early Bengal, under the patronage of different dynasties and individual kings, enjoyed religious liberality. Mutual respect and reverence for each other among the people of different religions marked the distinction of the period. The early Bengal epigraphs record the setting up of different religious establishments and donations made in favour of people of different religions. The purpose is always found as beneficial to people of different faiths, mingled with devotional attachment. The motivation is for acquiring religious merit as well as to uphold the principles of truthfulness, power and purity guided by mythology.