

Portrayal of Buddhism in Bengali Literature: A Journey through Time and Thought

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Abstract

Gautama Buddha is the epitome of Buddhist Phenomena, and religion has its effect on writings. So, Buddha's philosophy, guidance have not only shaped human life but also shaped a large segment of the literary canvas. This kind of religious influence has not only been restricted to Bihar state, the place of Buddha, but also has spread to Tibet, Japan and all over the world. Bengal is not off that map. Atis Dipankar is a well-known Bengali Buddhist monk who spread Buddhism in Tibet. Adding to that, Lui Pa, Bhusuk Pa, etc., who are the writers of Charyapada, are influenced by Buddhism. In Bengal, there are many places where Buddhist sculptures are still worshipped, but not as Goutam Buddha, but as *Mahadev*, a symbol of God of the Hindu Religion. For Instance, in Kandi, Murshidabad, there is a temple named '*Rudradeber Bari*' where a Buddhist sculpture is still being worshipped as *Mahadev*. This proves that Bengal was also influenced by Buddhism. This paper aims to analyse the influence of the Buddhist religion on Bengali literature. But for the lack of time and scope, I would like to slightly discuss regarding Atis Dipankara, Sahajia poets, Vaishnavism through which Buddhism has influenced and emerged in Bengali Literature, but it would be specific to Rabindranath Tagore's writing on Buddhism. This research paper has ended with a theoretical touch to open the door for further study on Buddhist literature.

Keywords: Bengali Literature, Buddhism, Sahajia Poets, Vaisnav Literature, Rabindranath Tagore.

Introduction

"Peace comes from within. Do not seek it without."¹

—Goutam Buddha

Buddha's philosophy of compassion (*mittya*), self-realisation, and non-attachment has deeply influenced socio-literary phenomena. Bengal, with its rich literary heritage, has absorbed Buddhist ideals, reflecting them in Vaishnava poetry, devotional literature, and modern works. Bihar, particularly Vaishali, remains a sacred space where Buddha preached his final sermon, marking a significant historical and philosophical connection to Buddhism. Understanding this relationship requires both literary analysis and experiential learning through a field visit to Vaishali, where Buddhist principles continue to influence contemporary thought and culture.

The Influence of Buddhism in Bengali Literature

Buddhist ideas have seamlessly blended into the spiritual and literary fabric of Bengal. The *Jataka* Tales and *Tipitaka* provided a foundational concept for moral storytelling, influencing early Bengali narrative traditions. The term 'Bodhisattva' is very popular in Bengali moral short stories. This term refers to the reincarnation of Goutam Buddha. Through this term, writers tell stories to shape children's psychology and build character, and that triggers curiosity in children's or people's minds regarding Goutam Buddha and Atish Dipankara is one of them. In the earlier stage, Bengal was influenced by Buddhist Philosophy through oral literature that includes Folk plays, Buddhist communities' festival narratives, etcetera.

One of Bengal's most influential Buddhist figures is Atisha Dipankara² Srijnana (982–1054 CE). He has played a key role in revitalising Buddhism in Tibet. His seminal text, *Bodhipathapradipa* (The Lamp for the

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Path to Enlightenment), structured spiritual progress based on ethical conduct, wisdom, and meditation. Atisha's teachings emphasised compassion (*mittya*) and mindfulness, principles that resonate in Bengali literature's devotional and philosophical works. The reference to this person can be found in Dinesh Chandra Sen's *Historical Fiction and Autobiographies*. Not only by this writer, his contribution can be found in *Satyendranath Bose*, *Rahul Sangkritayan's* writing and even in *Bengali Buddha sahitya*. In Bengali Literature, Atish Dipankara is the symbol of Travel and cross-culturalism, as he travelled to Tibet and influenced Tibetans as well as Bengalis to adopt Buddhist culture.

The influence of Buddhism in Bengali literature is also evident in the works (*Charyapada*) of Lui Pa and Bhusuk Pa, Buddhist Tantric poets associated with the Sahajiya tradition. Their verses reflect the idea of spontaneous enlightenment (*sahaja jnana*), emphasising the union of the individual soul with the divine through inner realisation. Their poetry laid the foundation for later Vaishnava Sahajiya traditions in Bengal, bridging Buddhist mysticism with Vaishnavism.

Although distinct in origin, Buddhism and Vaishnavism share common themes of devotion, compassion, and renunciation. Vaishnavism emphasises *bhakti* (devotion), while Buddhism upholds *mittya* (compassion), both advocating love as a means of transcending material desires.

“যদি তোর ডাক শুনে কেউ না আসে, তবে একলা চলো রে।”

– রবীন্দ্রনাথ ঠাকুর

(If no one responds to your call, then walk alone.)

–Rabindranath Tagore

Rabindranath Tagore's "Bhanusimher Padabali"⁴, written in the Brajabuli language, captures this synthesis. Though it is primarily dedicated to Vaisnavism, its portrayal of Radha's yearning for Krishna echoes the Buddhist idea of overcoming worldly attachments to attain spiritual enlightenment. Similarly, Buddhist literature speaks of the deep longing for enlightenment, where attachment to worldly desires is seen as an obstacle. Both traditions emphasise self-realisation and transcendence of materialism. Buddha's teaching "You, yourself, as much as anybody in the entire universe, deserve your love and affection" resonates with Vaishnava devotion, where divine love (*prema*) is the highest form of fulfilment. The poetry of Jayadeva's *Gita Govindam* and Chaitanya Mahaprabhu's devotional ecstasy reflects a mystical union with the divine, much like Buddhist meditative transcendence.

Tagore's *Chandalika*⁵ and Buddhist Themes

Tagore's play *Chandalika* is another significant work that

reflects Buddhist ideals. Inspired by the Buddhist text *Ashokavadana*, it tells the story of *Prakriti*, an untouchable woman who desires self-worth and social acceptance. The Dance drama has presented two contradictory images: one is the social deprivation of a lower caste woman, and the other is the intense desire for love. Tagore has shown how social marginalisation and untouchability can be vulnerable. In the play, *Prakriti*, the untouchable woman, is about to buy curd from *Doiwala* (*A Curd Seller*). In that moment, some women came and forbade the vendor from giving her (*Prakriti*) curd as she is untouchable. If the vendor gives her curd, he would also lose his caste. Then the playwright has shown how a Buddhist monk declines this social marginalisation and accepts water from that untouchable woman. This acceptance gives her a new birth, and she falls in love with the Buddhist monk because this may be the first time she has felt that she is not untouchable; she can also be acceptable and loved in society. This incident has taken the play to its climax. *Prakriti*, the untouchable girl, forces her mother to bring her the monk with whom she has fallen in love. *Prakriti's* mother is associated with some magical power, and the monk cannot resist the power of magic, and the magic brings him to the door of *Prakriti*. The monk has realised that *Prakriti* would like to make an attachment with him, and he prayed to Buddha to save him from this incident. Buddha saves his disciple, and *Prakriti* and her mother have realised their mistakes. They beg pardon from the monk, and he forgives them. Buddha and the monk have shown here that love cannot be tied; it is like freedom. On the other hand, it shows that Buddha is always there for his disciples. The play highlights specifically Buddha's message of equality and social justice, as expressed through the compassionate Buddhist monk *Ananda*, who treats *Prakriti* as a human being rather than an outcast. This aligns with Buddhism's rejection of the caste system and its advocacy for universal compassion and liberation from social oppression.

Tagore's *Abhisara* and Buddhism

Abhisara: The Tyrist is a poem written by Tagore in 1899. It is a narrative poem that tells the story of the reunion of a Buddhist monk and his disciple. The monk is *Upagupta*, and the disciple is *Basabadutta*, a courtesan. The poem starts with the line,

“*Santasi Upagupta was asleep under the shade of the city ramparts of Mathura*”

Upagupta, a monk, was far from a lavish life and was sleeping on the path of Mathura, which was at that time a hub of Buddhist culture. It was a dark and solitary night as the poet writes, “A breeze had blown off the lamps and

flares. The palace doors were shut. The stars of the night had disappeared behind clouds." The monk was under the bare sky in this kind of mysterious night. At that moment, Basabadutta encountered Upagupta and urged him to come into her home, as she says, "This is not the right place to sleep." It shows that the monk was interrupted by worldly beauty. But he declined her proposal gently by saying, "It is not yet time for me to visit this graceful one ... when the time is right, I will myself come to your bower." Here, the poet has shown that the monk has not rejected her completely but assured her that he would come at an appropriate time. The monsoon had come to an end, and it was time for spring. When the town was decorated with spring flowers, that courtesan, Basabadutta, was on the path suffering from smallpox. The poet writes, "...It was an evening in Chaitra. The breeze fluttered with restlessness. The trees along the path were laden with buds. The king's was flush with blooms of bakul, parul and rajanigandha." But this spring had not brought joy but emptiness as the poet writes, "...the city was empty as everyone had left for...". At that moment, the monk Upagupta again entered that city and encountered Basavadutta, who was lying on the path alone, her body was 'blistered with sores'. The citizens of Mathura threw her out to save themselves from the deadly disease. The sanyasi, Upagupta, came, sat beside her and covered her body with 'cool sandal paste'. The courtesan asked, "Who are you, o' compassionate soul?". The poem ends with Sanyasi's utterance, "Tonight is that time. O Basabadutta, I have come for our tyrist."

The word 'Tyrist' means *Abhisara*, which refers time when two lovers meet with each other. This love does not refer the worldly love; rather, it defines spiritual love. When the devotee meets with her God, that moment is known as Tyrist or *Abhisara*. In this poem, when the courtesan offered the monk to come into her home on that monsoon night, he said that this was not the right time to come. But when she was in pain, suffering alone on the path, the monk came and tried to reduce her suffering.

The poet has tried to show that Buddhism is always beyond earthly love and believes in the Platonic one. It has also portrayed another image that when the world rejects one, Buddhism accepts him or her. The poem has also presented Basabadutta's transformation from material love to spiritual awareness. The poet has highlighted how this spiritual consciousness can be achieved only through compassion and empathy.

Buddhism, Feminism, and Postmodernism

Buddhism's teachings on equality and self-liberation have influenced feminist thought. Buddha's rejection of rigid social hierarchies and his acceptance of women into the Sangha challenged traditional patriarchal norms. The

petroglyph of Koluha has inscribed that in that very place, Buddha converted Amropali, a courtesan dancer, into a Buddhist Nun. This can even be seen in Tagore's poem *Abhisara*. His teachings on suffering and impermanence resonate with postmodern critiques of power structures and identity formation.

Buddha and Postmodern Thinkers: Foucault and Lyotard

"Where there is power, there is resistance⁶." – Michel Foucault

"No one saves us but ourselves. No one can and no one may. We ourselves must walk the path." – Buddha

Buddhism aligns with Michel Foucault's ideas on power and subjectivity. Foucault's theory of self-discipline and the transformation of the self through ethical practices mirrors the Buddhist path to enlightenment. Just as Foucault deconstructs societal power structures, Buddha dismantles the illusions of ego and attachment, advocating self-awareness as the highest form of freedom, which has been analysed through Tagore's writings. Jean-François Lyotard's concept of rejecting grand narratives resonates with Buddhism's deconstruction of fixed truths, emphasising experiential knowledge over dogma. Both Buddhist philosophy and postmodernism challenge established norms, advocating for personal interpretation and experience over rigid doctrines. As in *Chandalika*, the monk has rejected the social norms and prejudices of marginalisation and untouchability.

Buddha and Sri Aurobindo: A Spiritual Parallel

Sri Aurobindo, though primarily a Vedantic thinker, acknowledged the depth of Buddhist philosophy. His Integral Yoga shares similarities with Buddhist mindfulness practices, emphasising spiritual evolution and transcendence. Both traditions advocate inner awakening and self-realisation as the means to ultimate liberation, as Tagore has shown Self-realisation and Ultimate liberation through the characters of *Prakriti* and *Basabadutta*. Aurobindo's vision of a divine consciousness evolving through human experience aligns with Buddhist concepts of enlightenment, where individual transformation contributes to universal harmony.

Conclusion

Buddhism's legacy in Bengali literature, from the Sahajiyā poets *Lui Pa* and *Bhusuk Pa* to *Atisha Dipankara* and Tagore's "*Bhanusimher Padabali*", highlights its lasting impact on spiritual and literary traditions. A visit to Vaishali deepens this appreciation, bridging the past

with the present. As the world grapples with existential dilemmas, Buddha's teachings continue to offer a path of wisdom, compassion, and inner peace. However, Buddhism saw a gradual decline in Bengal due to multiple factors. The rise of Hindu Bhakti movements, coupled with the resurgence of Brahmanical traditions, led to the assimilation of many Buddhist ideas into mainstream Hinduism. Many Buddhist sites and traditions were absorbed into Hinduism, often transforming Buddhist deities into Hindu ones. A striking example is found in Kandi, Murshidabad, West Bengal, where in *Rudradeb's Temple*, an idol is being worshipped daily and which originally depicted a mendicant Buddha. However, over time, as Brahminical forces gained dominance, the Buddhist temple was repurposed as a Shaivite temple, and the idol came to be worshipped as a representation of Rudradeb (Shiva)—despite its distinctly Buddhist features. Even in 2025, this statue continues to be venerated as a Hindu deity, reflecting the long-lasting impact of religious transformation and assimilation.

Additionally, the Turkish and Mughal invasions brought Islamic influences, leading to large-scale conversions. Many Bengali Buddhists, particularly in regions that are now part of Bangladesh, converted to Islam under the influence of Sufi saints. The emphasis on equality and spiritual devotion in Sufism resonated with Buddhist communities, facilitating this transition. This phenomenon exemplifies how Buddhism was systematically assimilated, rebranded, or erased, leading to its eventual decline in many regions of India. In contrast, countries such as Thailand, Sri Lanka, and Myanmar are preserving their Buddhist traditions. The Thai Buddhists are still travelling to Vaishali to connect with the spiritual essence of Buddha's teachings.

So the whole paper would like to be concluded by uttering:

“...Buddham saraṇaṃ gacchāmi.....”

Notes

- 1 This is from Sutta Nipata 4.14 in the Athakavagga, uploaded in Fake Buddha Quotes.
2. Atish Dipankar is a Bengali Buddhist Monk, immensely influenced by Buddhist philosophy. He has spreaded Buddhist religion in Tibet.
3. This song is written by Rabindranath Tagore. It was published in 1905 in *Bhandar Magazine*. Later it was printed in Gitabitan.
4. Tagore, Rabindranath. *Bhanusimher Padabali*. Visva-Bharati, 1884. Print.
5. Tagore, Rabindranath. *Chandalika*. Visva-Bharati, 1938. Print.
6. Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Pantheon Books, 1977.print.
7. Tagore, Rabindranath. *Bhanusimher Padabali*. Visva-Bharati, 1884. Print.
8. Aurobindo, Sri. *The Life Divine*. Sri Aurobindo Ashram. Print.
9. Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Pantheon Books, 1977.print.
10. Jayadeva. *Gita Govindam*. Translated by Barbara Stoler Miller, Oxford University Press, 1977. Print.
11. Lyotard, Jean-François. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Translated by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, University of Minnesota Press, 1984.print
12. Tagore, Rabindranath. *Bhanusimher Padabali*. Visva-Bharati, 1884. Print.
13. Tagore, Rabindranath. *Chandalika*. Visva-Bharati, 1938. Print.
14. Tagore, Rabindranath. *Abhisara: The Tyrist*. Rapsody. Print.