



**A BRIEF HISTORY OF BANGLADESH BUDDHIST  
COMMUNITY AND IT'S FALL DOWN CAUSES  
BETWEEN 13th AND 18th CENTURY.**

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**Abstract**

The main purpose of this paper is to give an overview of the presence and history of Buddhism in the Indian subcontinent, especially in the region of Bengal in South Asia where Bangladesh is now located. A rich region in history, Bangladesh is today the eighth most populous country in the world, and has established in its constitution freedom of religion. Although Islam is the most practiced religion (almost 90%), Hinduism coexists as the first minority (approximately 9%), Buddhism, and Christianity as other minorities (less than 1% each). But it was not always so, between the 8th and 12th centuries after Christ, the Pala Empire was established in the region, whose kings, or emperors, were Buddhist followers of the tantric school, being known this time as the golden era of Buddhism in Bengal. In this work the possible causes of the decay and fall of the Pala Empire, and with it that of Buddhism in Bengal, are evaluated. Different explanations have been given to this event, but the main ones are: The corruption of religion, when the Tantric school moved away from the principles of Buddha's teachings, little social impact due to lack of connection with the popular social classes, hostility from non-Buddhist religions, and the rise of Islam in the region. There is also a brief bibliographic review on the history of Bangladesh and Buddhism, as well as its inseparable relationship with the history of India, and the current situation of Buddhism in Bangladesh.

**Introduction**

Bangladesh, is a country located in South Asia. Its territory is surrounded almost entirely by India, except for a small strip to the southeast where it borders Burma. Geographically, the country is situated in the fertile terrain of the river Ganges delta, so it is subject to annual floods caused by monsoons and cyclones. Together with the Indian province of West Bengal, it is the ethno-linguistic region of Bengal. In fact, in Bengali, the name "Bangladesh" means "Country of Bengal".

Its present borders were established with the second partition of Bengal in 1947, when the region became the eastern part of the newly formed Pakistan country. However, it was separated from the western part by 1,600 km of Indian territory. In 1971, political and linguistic discrimination, as well as economic neglect, brought with it a series of conflicts with Pakistan, which led to the war of independence and the establishment of Bangladesh as an autonomous nation.

Bangladesh is the eighth most populous country on planet earth, highlighting its high population density. Since 1975 its gross domestic product (GDP) per capita has doubled and the poverty rate has fallen by 20% since the early 1990s decade.

Bangladesh is divided into seven administrative sections, each named like its capital: Barisal, Chittagong, Dhaka, Khulna, Rajshahi, Sylhet, and Rangpur.



Dhaka is the capital and largest city of Bangladesh. Other important cities are Jaitul (Yaitul), Chittagong, Khulna, Rajshahi, Sylhet, Barisal, Bogra, Comilla, Mymensingh and Rangpur.

The most widespread religion is Islam (89.7%) and a considerable minority adheres to Hinduism (9.2%). About 97% of Muslims are Sunnis, while the rest are Shiites. Other religious groups include Buddhists (0.7%, mostly Theravadas), Christians (0.3%, mainly Catholics) and animists (0.1%). Islam is the state religion, but other religions can also be practiced in complete harmony, without persecution or discrimination.

## **BRIEF HISTORICAL REVIEW**

The oldest archaeological remains found in the Bengal region date back four thousand years, when the region was populated by the Dravidian, Tibetan-Burmese and Austro-Asian peoples. In this area, the kingdom of Gangaridai was formed from the end of the 7th century BC, although later it was united with the kingdom of Bihar, to finally be subdued by the Magadha, Nanda, Maurya and Sunga empires. From the third century until the sixth century Anno Domini (AD), Bengal was part of the Gupta and Harsha Vardhana empires. After the latter's fall, a Bengali leader named Shashanka founded a short-lived kingdom in Bengal. In this way, Shashanka is considered the first independent king in the history of Bangladesh.

After a period of disorder, the Buddhist dynasty of the Pala ruled the region for about four hundred years, followed by a shorter reign of the Hindu dynasty of the Seine. Islam was

introduced in Bengal in the 12th century by Muslim merchants and Sufi missionaries; The later Muslim conquests helped to spread Islam throughout the region.

In 1204, Bakhtiyar Khilji, a Turkic general, defeated Lakshman Sen of the Sena dynasty and conquered much of Bengal. For the next three centuries, the region was ruled by dynasties of sultans and masters Bhuiyan. In the sixteenth century, the Mongol Empire conquered the territory of Bengal, while Dhaka became an important center of Mongolian administration.

European merchants arrived in the late 15th century, and their influence grew until the British East India Company gained control of Bengal after the Battle of Plassey in 1757. The bloody rebellion of 1857, known as the rebellion of the Sepoys, led to the transfer of authority to the crown, with a British viceroy in charge of the administration of the territory. During colonial rule, famines tormented the Indian subcontinent many times, including the great famine of Bengal in 1943, which claimed more than 3 million lives.

When India was divided in 1947, Bengal was separated according to religious tendencies: the western part was integrated to India and the eastern part joined Pakistan, as a province called East Bengal (later renamed East Pakistan), with its capital In Dhaka.

In 1970, a strong cyclone devastated the coast of East Pakistan, killing more than half a million people, but the central government's response was almost zero. The discontent of the Bengali population grew when Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was barred from taking office when the Awami League candidate won the majority in Parliament in the elections that same year.

After negotiations with Mujibur Rahman, Pakistani President Yahya Khan, arrested him in the early hours of March 26, 1971 and launched Searchlight Operation. Prior to his arrest by the Pakistani army, Rahman formally declared the independence of Bangladesh and encouraged the entire population to fight until the last soldier of the Pakistani army was expelled from East Pakistan. The leaders of the Awami League established a government in exile in Calcutta, India. On April 14, 1971, this exiled government sworn in Mujib Nagar formally as the first president of Bangladesh, with Tajuddin Ahmad as the country's prime minister.

The Bangladesh Liberation War lasted nine months. The Bangladesh forces formed by eleven sectors were led by General M.A.G. Osmani, while Mukti Bahini carried out a massive guerrilla war against the forces of Pakistan, with the support of the Indian armed forces. On December 16, 1971, this alliance won a decisive victory over Pakistan, in which the Indian armed forces seized more than 90,000 Pakistani prisoners of war.

## **BRIEF OVERVIEW OF BUDDHISM.**

Buddhism is one of the religions arising from the context of Hinduism that precedes it, as Christianity arises from Judaism. It is one of the major religions of the world and although it arises historically in India, in our days its presence in this nation is not majority, extending mainly through southeast and north of Asia, beyond the Himalayas, especially in China.

The history of Buddhism begins with Buddha, 2,500 years ago. By then, India was an empire that occupied a surface much larger than it occupies today, extending to what is now Pakistan, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sikkim and part of Burma. At that time, Hinduism had hardened into a very rigid caste system, where priests or Brahmins had almost absolute power

over the people. In this rigid social context, was born in a village of the north, where now is Nepal, a prince of name Siddhartha Gautama son of the local king, Suddodhana.

Siddhartha's father was visited by an astrologer who told him that the prince would be a great king if he stayed away from the reality of the world, but if he knew the pain and misery of its inhabitants, he would leave the throne, the palace, and everything else, to look restlessly for a life of renunciation of pleasures until he became an wise spiritually enlightened that would end the pain of sentient beings.

Thus, Suddodhana kept his son isolated in the palace, without contact with the outside world, until, in his youth, Siddhartha decided to get to know it. At that time, he had four encounters and four truths were revealed: in the world, there is misery, sickness, death, and spirituality. Before these revelations, Siddhartha retires for seven years to Tibet, next to seven masters, to look for the way towards the illumination, happening to be known like Buddha.

The doctrine of Buddha or Dharma is based on four fundamental pillars to seek the illumination. Per him, there are four basic statements (the four truths) that characterize the problem of suffering, plus the eight precepts that respond to this problem and which constitute a philosophy of life summarized

The four truths:

1. Suffering exists and is inevitable. This is because everything is transient, nothing endures in the universe, and we are aware of them.
2. The origin of suffering is desire. This desire manifests itself in a constant thirst: thirst for existence and thirst for pleasure.
3. Suffering can be extinguished by cutting desire (Nirvana).
4. To extinguish suffering, we must follow the path leading to Nirvana.

The path is manifested in three aspects of man, which in the end constitute the octuple (the eight precepts):

A) Mental Discipline:

1. Concentration: always stay focused on the goal.
2. Attention: to what we feel, not to covet, not to be miser, not to have anger.
3. Effort: Dedicate yourself to the right purposes.

B) Ethics:

4. Words: do not lie, do not insult, do not talk in vain.
5. Action: do not kill, do not steal, do not commit adultery (here is the basis of ahimsa or nonviolence).
6. Livelihoods: Refers to abstention from having a profession or trade that may be harmful to other living beings.

C) Wisdom:

7. Consciousness: Refers to the concentration that is required to move forward on the path of achieving tranquility, through detachment, having constant thoughts of renunciation.
8. Comprehension: to attain wisdom, through the understanding of the four noble truths.

According to his followers, Buddha attained a state of perfection (illumination), following the eight precepts, entering to Nirvana at the age of eighty. Buddha considered that his mission consisted in illuminating the shadows of the world.

For Buddhists, the end of existence is to attain the illumination, understood as a supreme state of consciousness in which the individual no longer identifies with the limitations of the ego, overcoming all the desires of pleasure, and the fears of the unpleasant. In this way, no more Karma (metaphysical energy, invisible and incalculable, that derives from the acts of the people), is generated. Allowing the consciousness to reintegrate into the totality of Nirvana. Thus, eliminating the concern for reincarnation and the suffering of being born, aging, sick and dying.

The basic practice of Buddhism is meditation, which in Eastern culture refers to the complete annihilation of all thought, the full absorption of the mind in the void or Shunyata. In that state of total emptiness, the desire is extinguished, and in time the illumination takes place. To achieve this, Buddha taught two fundamental techniques: the Shamata or total concentration on an object of meditation: breathing, and Vipassana or contemplation of the coming and going of bodily sensations and mental contents.

In general, Buddhism was implanted in many regions, without entering direct conflict with indigenous religions, but in many cases, exchanging influences, so that Buddhism is divided into three major currents or schools:

- The THERAVĀDA (Sutric). Located in South Asia. Literally, the Little Vehicle. It is the oldest school of Buddhism; it is conservative and the most attached to the original doctrine of Buddha. They base their tradition on the so-called CANON PALI, a compendium that is born of the council in which were transcribed the speeches that the Buddha gave throughout his life after illumination. It is characterized by paying more attention to the strict disciplines to which each subject personally submits. It corresponds to the most individualistic and subjective view of Buddhism.
- The MAHĀYĀNA (Sutric). Located in East Asia. Literally Great vehicle, it is a more liberal line that is oriented to the importance of compassion and love towards all sentient beings. It makes a great difference with the previous one, since the search for peace or nirvana is no longer so individual, but is in complete dedication to others.
- The VAJRAYĀNA (Tantric). Located in North Asia. Also, known as Tantric Buddhism. He leans toward yogic techniques and magical rituals. It is often seen as the third main school of Buddhism, although it is argued that it is the "harmony of all previous schools".

## **THE GOLDEN TIME OF BUDDHISM IN BENGAL.**

The Pala dynasty, Pala Empire or Pala Kingdom was an ancient state of Bengal, whose existence ranges from the 8th to the 12th century.

This dynasty, was founded towards the year 750, in the times of the king Gopala I. It reached its apogee in the first quarter of 9th century. Dharmapala, the king who succeeded him, extended his empire from the Deccan plateau to Kannauj. His successor, King Devapala, extended the empire, conquering the states of Assam and Orissa around the year 850.

The Pala dynasty promoted Vajrayana Buddhism, to the detriment of Hinduism. The great Buddhist center of Vikramasila knew moments of splendor under the patronage of the kings of this dynasty. In this way, the influence of Tantric Buddhism spread in Southeast Asia and the southern end of the Indian subcontinent, Sri Lanka and the Maldives.

From the reign of Narayanapala, the Pala empire gradually disintegrated due to the increased power of the Pratihara of Kannauj. After almost a century eclipsed, the kingdom Pala took advantage of the decadence of the Pratihara and regained its dynamism during the reign of Mahipala, extending its dominion towards the west until Benarés. By the year 1020, the Pala kingdom was attacked from the south by the Chola dynasty.

At the end of the 12th century, the Pala kingdom was besieged by the Seine dynasty, Hindu, who briefly reigned in Bengal until 1230. Finally, the Muslim invasion of Muhammad Bakhtiyar culminates with the decline of the empire and the looting and destruction of the Buddhist university of Vikramasila. The disappearance of the Pala dynasty meant the decline of Buddhism in the area, and the ascendancy of Islam.

The Pala Empire can be considered as the Golden Age of Bengal. Never, before, have the Bengali people reached such a height of power and glory to that degree. The Palas were responsible for the introduction of Mahayana Buddhism in Tibet, Bhutan and Myanmar. During the period of Pala, Bengal became the main center of Buddhism, as well as its learning. Universities like Nalanda, Vikramshila and Paharpur prospered under the auspices of the leaders of the Pala empire. By then, the Pala Empire had intense trade with South-East Asia, as well as with China and Tibet.

## **THE FALL OF BUDDHISM IN BENGAL.**

Several causes influenced the fall of the Pala empire. In addition to the Hindu hostility towards Buddhism (let's not forget that they considered it a heresy from within), the rise of Islam, or the corruption of the Buddhist system, there were other, deeper reasons.

Muslims did not have a special spirit against Buddhism. But, why did Buddhism succumb and not Hinduism? One plausible explanation is that while Hinduism spread throughout the country, gaining people in the streets, Buddhism was concentrated in the great monasteries, and when these were destroyed, nothing remained outside of them, capable of resisting the new Muslim power or the influence of a resurgent Hinduism.

Without realizing it, its decline had already been generated centuries ago with the prevalence of classist attitudes, which the Buddha himself denounced and angered the Brahmins. Among them, the marginalization of the women of the religious life, that ended up provoking the total elimination of the monasteries of bikhunis. Their religious marginalization, meant that women were socially relegated again. Buddhism had been uprooted from the village into a segregated religious caste.

Contradicting the Buddha himself, Indian Buddhism had assimilated the old Hindu patriarchal system which held that only religious men (like the Brahmins) were the only ones who could attain illumination. With that they left the weakest of society with no message of hope.

Thus, having eliminated the Buddhist religious elite, without enough popular social substratum and with the important cultural transmitting role of the eliminated woman, Indian Buddhism died on its own merits. For many scholars, the most important causes of Buddhist decline in the Indo-Bangladesh subcontinent were:

1. Tantrism: Buddhism influenced by the Tantric school based on magical conceptions, ignoring the teachings of Buddha, was considered a corruption of Buddhism. In addition, the Tantric Buddhists were busy looking for a comfortable life instead of looking for the path to Nirvana. As a result, anti-Buddhist sentiment grew in Indo-Bangladesh and the consequent decline of Buddhist followers.
2. Foundation of Bhikkhuni Sangha: Sangha is a Pali or Sanskrit word that can be translated as "association," "assembly," or "community." Although Buddhism has always maintained that women are as capable of attaining illumination as men, the canonical texts maintain that Buddha was reluctant to allow women to join the sangha.
3. Non-Buddhist hostility, to Buddhism: According to scholars, many non-Buddhist rulers destroyed Buddhist monasteries and killed thousands of Buddhist monks, as well as hundreds of followers. Because of this situation some Buddhists converted to Islam or Hinduism, others hid their identity, and even several emigrated to other countries. At the end, Buddhism declined sharply from Indo-Bangladesh.
4. Corruption: one of the main reasons was the corruption of the monks and the laity. They avoided the teachings of Buddha, and provided various practices such as, magic charms, witchcraft, as well as black magic in the name of Buddhism. Monks and laymen lost their original thinking, used some religious methods and duties of Brahmanism, which were condemned by the Buddha. This contributed to a loss of belief in Buddhism.
5. Lack of social impact: Many scholars said that one of the main causes of the decline of Buddhism in the Indo-Bangladesh subcontinent was the lack of social impact. There is no evidence in any Buddhist text and no Sangha foundation on social activities such as marriage, birth, funeral services, etc.

## **THE ARRIVAL OF ISLAM TO BENGAL.**

According to some historians, about 1200 AD, a daring Turkish official named Muhammad Bakhtiyar commanded a group of several hundred Turkish cavalry soldiers. They drove rapidly across the Ganges plain toward its delta in Bengal. The men invaded some venerable Buddhist monasteries in neighboring Bihar before turning their attention to the northwestern portion of the delta, then governed by a gentle and generous Hindu monarch of the Seine dynasty. Already for some 300 years before, the presence of Turkish merchants in the region was common, so the small army of Bakhtiyar used as a strategy, to disguise the men of horse dealers, to be able to enter the real city of Nudiya. Once inside the city, instead of going to the market, they rode directly to the palace of the king, where they confronted and dominated the guards. The Hindu king, who had just sat down to eat, was completely overwhelmed, and at the news that his guards had fallen, he hurried to leave the city, leaving a back door and fleeing, with many of his associates, to the wooded area of East Bengal, completely renouncing to his kingdom.

This overthrow of the Hindu monarch inaugurated an era that lasted over five centuries, during which most of Bengal was dominated by rulers who professed the Islamic faith. The fact that

Bengal was governed at that time by Islamic rulers was not exceptional, since from then until the 18th century, Muslim rulers governed most of the Indian subcontinent. However, the surprising thing was that between the provinces of the interior or rural provinces of India, only in Bengal did most the Aboriginal population adopt the religion of the ruling class, Islam.

Now, there are several theories to try to explain how Islam spread so much in the Bengal region. Eaton, from the University of California (1996), describes them below. The first, of course, the classic of domination by the army, a theory rejected by scholars because it could not explain mass conversion. Another theory commonly used to explain Islamization in India and especially in the Bengal region is the Religion of Sponsorship theory. According to this, it points to the fact that the Indians of the pre-modern era converted to Islam to receive some non-religious favor of the ruling class, such as tax relief, promotion in bureaucracy, etc. This theory has always found the favor of secular social scientists trained in the West who view any religion as a dependent variable of some non-religious agenda, in particular, an alleged desire for social improvement or prestige. Although this theory explains the conversion in large urban centers, it does not satisfy the response to the deep Islamization of the rural and agricultural areas of the Bengal region.

To this end, another theory appeared, the Thesis of the Religion of Social Freedom. Created by British ethnographers and historians, together with many Pakistani and Bangladeshi citizens, and subscribed in turn by innumerable journalists and historians of South Asia, especially Muslims, this theory has long been the most widely accepted explanation for Islamization in the Indian subcontinent.

According to this theory the prevailing Hindu caste system was immutable over time and rigidly discriminatory against its own lower orders, that is, popular social classes. For centuries, the common people of the popular classes suffered under the overwhelming burden of oppressive and tyrannical Hindus of the upper classes, especially the Brahmins. Then, when Islam came to the Indian subcontinent, carrying its liberating message, of social equality as a predicate, these same oppressed classes, trying to escape the yoke of oppression of the Brahmins and aware of a social equality that until now had been denied them, decided to convert to Islam en masse.

## **SITUACION ACTUAL DEL BUDISME ON BANGLADESH.**

According to the government report in Bangladesh live 27 different ethnic groups, at least 13 different groups lives in Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) and Chittagong plain. Buddhist communities were established in various regions of Bangladesh, known as Chittagong, Chittagong Hill Tracts, Comilla, Noakhali, Cox's Bazar and Barisal. Most of the Chittagong Hills Tracts inhabitants are Buddhists from the Chakma and Marma tribes.

The Buddhists of Bangladesh are followers of the Theravada tradition. The tradition and Buddhist cultures of Bangladesh are similar to the cultures of South and Southeast Asia. The Buddhist Sangha of Bangladesh was divided into four sub-sects, namely the Sangharaja Nikaya, the Mahasthavira Nikaya, the Sudharma Nikaya and Doara Nikaya.

Recent work shows that in Bangladesh there are currently 1,290 Buddhist monasteries, of which eight are in the capital city, Dhaka.



Several Buddhist communities have now been identified in Bangladesh, which can be divided into four groups:

1. Bengali Buddhists (Barua) live in plain Chittagong.
2. Several Buddhist tribes live in Chittagong Hill Tracts, among which we find the Chakma, Tanchangyas, Marmas, etc.
3. Rakhine Buddhist and a part of the Marmas Buddhists live in Patuakhali, Bargunas and in places such as Ramu, Cox's Bazar, Palang, Teknaf, and many other mountainous regions of Chittagong Hill Tracts.
4. The Buddhist orao autochthon (Simha or Simha-Baua) who live in the districts of North Bagura, Rangpur, Dinajpura, Nogaon and Jaypur, Feni, Comilla and Noakhali.

## **CONCLUSION.**

Buddhism is the fifth religion with more followers in the world. Its history goes back more than 2500 years, when Prince Siddharta found the way for the illumination, becoming from then on Buddha. Buddhism was born in the Indian subcontinent, as a division of Hinduism, although today it is not the predominant religion in the area. It has three classical schools, two suntrics (THERAVĀDA and MAHĀYĀNA), and one tantric (VAJRAYĀNA).

It lived its golden age in the region of Bengal, between the 8th and 12th centuries after Christ, when the Pala empire was formed, under the tutelage of a series of Buddhist kings of the tantric school. What is known as the corruption of religion, given by the departure of the principles dictated by Buddha, added to other factors, such as the arrival of Islam to the Indo-Bangladesh subcontinent, non-Buddhist hostility and the lack of popular roots and connection with the inhabitants of the Bengal region led to the decline of religion in the area, to the point that today, less than 1% of Bangladesh people, profess that religion, basically in the Chittagong region.

Bangladesh, located in the south of the Indian subcontinent in Asia, currently. is the eighth country with more population in the planet Earth. Its political system of parliamentary democracy establishes constitutionally freedom of religion and worship, despite the official religion is Islam.

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