

Pala Dynasty

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Pala Dynasty' ruled Bengal and Bihar for about four centuries from the middle of the 8th century AD. Founded by gopala, the rule of the dynasty underwent various vicissitudes and lasted for eighteen generations of kings.

The reigns of dharmapala and devapala formed the period of ascendancy of the dynasty, when the dynastic rule gained firm footing in Bengal and Bihar and the Palas felt powerful enough to venture out in the political arena of northern India. Both Dharmapala and Devapala were engaged in a long drawn struggle for the possession of the madhyadexa of northern Indian empire with two other powers - the Gurjara Pratiharas of western India and the Rastrakutas of Deccan, and they had success for a limited period. Dharmapala succeeded in placing his protegee on the throne of Kanauj. Devapala also held his own against the Pratiharas. The Pala records are full of eulogistic verses portraying Dharmapala and Devapala as great conquerors. Bengal came to be reckoned as a powerful force in northern Indian politics.

With the death of Devapala ended the period of ascendancy and a period of stagnation followed which gradually led to decline and disintegration until mahipala I rejuvenated the rule of the dynasty. It is quite likely that stagnation and decline came in as a result of a succession problem after the reign of Devapala.

The question of succession to the Pala throne after Devapala presents a fairly complicated problem. Names of three kings are found in the Pala records- Surapala, mentioned in the Badal pillar inscription in between Devapala and Narayanapala, Vigrahapala, mentioned in the Bhagalpur copperplate of Narayanapala, and Mahendrapala, mentioned in the recently discovered jagjivanpur copperplate as the son and successor of Devapala. The Badal inscription does not give any indication about the relationship either between Surapala and Devapala, or Surapala and Narayanapala. Vigrahapala was the son of Jayapala and grandson of Dharmapala's brother Vakpala. All the kings who ruled the Pala empire after Vigrahapala were direct descendants of the line of Vakpala, brother of Dharmapala.

So it is clear that the rule of the direct descendants of Gopala came to an end after Mahendrapala and passed on to the line of Vakpala. So the existence of three names after Devapala is indicative of a dynastic trouble. Mahendrapala may have succeeded to the throne of the Pala kingdom after Devapala, but the other claimants, Surapala and Vigrahapala, may have carved out an independent status for themselves within the empire and ultimately the dynastic rule passed on to the line descending directly from Vigrahapala.

The period of stagnation that followed the succession problem continued for more than a hundred years covering the reigns of five generations of kings. During the period the Pala kings lacked energy and vigour, hardly was there any attempt at expansion, and they were not powerful enough to check invasions from outside (of the Chandellas and the Kalachuris towards the end of the 10th century AD) or uprisings from inside. The kamboja gaudapatis carved out for themselves an independent position in parts of western and northern Bengal in the middle of the 10th century AD, when three kings (Rajyapala, Narayanapala and Nayapala) ruled successively. For a time the Pala empire was confined to parts of Bihar only.

The reign of Mahipala I brought back vitality and vigour and gave a second lease of life to the Pala empire. He succeeded in bringing back the lost territories in northern and western Bengal and restored Pala dynastic rule to a firmer footing. Mahipala I captured a place in popular imagination by his public welfare works and his name survived for long in the ballads and folklore. During the reigns of his four successors (a period of about 40 years) up to the reign of Ramapala the fortunes of the dynasty seem to have fallen to its lowest ebb. The weakness of Pala rule was clearly exposed during the reign of Mahipala II, when the revolt of the samantas (varendra rebellion) succeeded in establishing an independent rule of Kaivarta chief Divya in northern Bengal.

Ramapala, during his long reign of over 40 years, succeeded in retrieving the position of the dynasty by recapturing northern Bengal and also extending his empire towards Orissa, Kamarupa and madhyadesha of northern India. He gave a check to the tendency to dissension, which was evident from the reigns of Nayapala and Vigrahapala III. He gave the decadent Pala power a new lease of life. Once he was gone the forces of disintegration and dissension set in, which his successors could hardly cope with. It is likely that the Senas asserted an independent position in southern Radha by the close of Ramapala's reign or early in the reign of his successor, Kumarapala. Madanapala, the last known Pala emperor, lost north Bengal to the Senas sometime after his 8th regnal year and his rule towards the closing years of his reign was confined to parts of Bihar only. Govindapala and Palapala, whose names are found in inscriptions from Bihar, kept up the pretence of being the successors of the imperial Palas in small principalities of Bihar. But their connection with the Palas, if there were any, cannot be proved.

Glories of the Palas' The long reign of the Palas form a glorious period in the history of ancient Bengal. The dynasty ruled for about four hundred years, a rarity in the annals of dynastic history. The achievements of Bengal during this long period are indeed the glories of the Palas. Widespread empire, organised administrative system, ruling policy oriented towards welfare of the people, unprecedented excellence in the field of arts and cultivation of knowledge and literature all these are the achievements and glories of the Pala dynasty.

In the period of ascendancy the Pala empire witnessed widespread extension. In the beginning of the ninth century the Palas succeeded in spreading their sphere of influence up to Kanauj, if not over the whole of northern India, and this was Bengal's first successful involvement in the politics of northern India. Though their hegemony in northern India did not last long, but it must be said that the power and strength that was generated during the early years of Pala rule, allowed them to hold their own against the aggressions of the northern Indian powers in the 10th and 11th centuries AD.

More laudable were the achievements of the Palas in the field of administration. The Pala copperplates bear ample testimony to their well-organised system of administration. An organised system of administration prevailed from the village level to the central government level. They inherited an administrative structure from the Guptas and it was to their credit that they made the structure more efficient and added many new characteristics. They built up an efficient structure for revenue collection. The long list of state-officials, found in the Pala copperplates, clearly indicate that the administration was taking care of every aspect of public life - from the ferry ghats to the riverways, land routes, trade and commerce, towns and ports, and law and order in the country. Even forest or market management was not left out. The basis of their long rule was the efficient administrative system.

The most glorious aspect of Pala rule was their policy of public-welfare. The Pala rulers were

Buddhists, but majority of their subjects were Hindus. Dharmapala had adopted the policy of religious toleration as the state policy. He had declared that he is 'conversant with the precepts of shastras' and he made 'the castes conform to their proper tenets'. This policy was followed by his successors. There is no doubt that the Hindu gods and goddesses and the Brahmins received liberal patronage from the Pala rulers, though they themselves were devout Buddhists. Brahmins occupied high official posts. Except one or two, all the Pala copperplates record grant of land to temples of Hindu gods and goddesses or to Brahmins. There is no evidence of any religious discord between the Buddhists and the Hindus in the society. Religious toleration and mutual coexistence can be identified as the characteristic of the social life of the people in the Pala period.

This social peace over a long period of time must have contributed to developments in other fields. There are instances of welfare activities of the Pala rulers. Dharmapala is known to have excavated a few tanks by spending several thousands of dramma (silver coins). Mahipala I had occupied a place in the hearts of the people of Bengal by his welfare activities - digging tanks and establishing towns, which bear his name. Remains of many buildings of the Pala period bear testimony to the welfare activities of the rulers of the dynasty. The tradition of religious harmony and toleration that was created in the Pala period, was given a sudden jolt during the period of the Senas and the ground was prepared for the easy acceptance of Islam in the subsequent period. The long Pala period produced an atmosphere of accommodation and admixture of Hindu-Buddhist culture and as a result were evolved the sahajiya and tantrik cults, the legacy of which transcended through the medieval period down to the modern. The legacy of religious-social-cultural synthesis that was evolved during the rule of the Palas was a glorious achievement of the period and this trait was an important ingredient in the 'personality' of ancient Bengal. Buddhism spread to Tibet, Java, Sumatra and Malayasia during the Pala period. The pundits from the Buddhist Viharas of Bengal played very significant role in the propagation and spread of Buddhism in these countries.

The brightest aspect of Pala glories was manifest in the field of different arts. Distinctive achievements are seen in the arts of architecture, terracotta, sculpture and painting. The somapura mahavihara at paharpur, a creation of Dhamapala, proudly announces the excellence of the architectural art achieved in the Pala period. It is the largest Buddhist Vihara in the Indian subcontinent and the plan of its central shrine was evolved in Bengal. In the Nalanda inscription of Vipulasrimitra it has been described as jagatam netraikavishrama bhu (pleasing to the eyes of the world). Experts believe that its architectural plan, especially the gradually receding crucified plan of its central shrine, had influenced the architecture of the neighbouring countries like Myanmar and Indonesia. A few Buddhist buildings in these countries, built in the 13th and 14 centuries, seem to have followed the Paharpur example.

The terracotta plaques recovered from Paharpur amply demonstrate the excellence of the art in the Pala period. These plaques, used mainly in surface decoration of the walls, have been recognised as unique creation of the Bengal artists. Side by side with the depiction of religious subjects, the artists have chosen subjects from the everyday life of the people, and hence their importance as sources of social history cannot be overemphasised. There is no doubt that the terracotta art reached a high water mark in the Pala period. Specimens of Pala architecture are scattered over Bengal and Bihar. Dharmapala built the vikramasila mahavihara (at Patharghata in Bhagalpur district of Bihar) and Odantpur Vihara in Bihar. Somapura Vihara and Vikramasila Vihara were acknowledged in the Buddhist world as two important centres of Buddhist learning in the period between 9th and 12th centuries AD. Among other Viharas of the Pala period Traikutaka, Devikota, Pandita, Fullabadi and jagaddala vihara are notable. It may rightly be said that the fame of Bengal spread in the then Buddhist world for the cultivation of Buddhist religion and culture and of other knowledge in the various centres that grew under the patronage of

the Pala rulers. Many scholars came to these centres from far and wide. Devapala granted five villages at the request of the Sailendra king of Java for the upkeepment of the matha established at Nalanda for the scholars of that country. The Buddhist Viharas in the Pala empire played a significant role in the propagation of Buddhism in the neighbouring countries of Nepal, Tibet and Sri Lanka. Buddhist pundits of Bengal contributed to the spread of Buddhist culture; among them the name of atish dipankar shrijnanstands out most prominently.

No remains of Hindu temples of the Pala period have yet been found. But parts of doorframes or pillars used in temples have been found, and replicas of temples appear in the sculptures of the period. On the basis of these it can be surmised that temple architecture also was developed in the period.

Of all the arts of the period sculptural art witnessed phenomenal development. The Gupta tradition of sculptural art attained a new height under the patronage of the Pala rulers and it came to be designated as 'Pala School of Sculptural Art'. The art incorporated lot of local characteristics in Bengal under the Palas and it continued right up to the end of the 12th century. In the museums in Bangladedesh and West Bengal the most notable exhibits are the innumerable beautiful sculptures on Rajmahal black basalt stone. The deities seemed to have assumed life through the masterly carving of the sculptors. The sculptural art of Bengal made a mark in the arena of Indian sculptures. The artistic genius of the Bengal sculptors blossomed to perfection in the period. Similarly Bronze sculptures of Bengal came to be recognised as specimens of a matured art, and specialists think that the Bengal bronzes influenced the art in south-east Asian countries.

The art of painting was not far behind. Any specimen of painting of the pre-Pala period has not yet been found, even wall-paintings on religious buildings are absent. Taranatha (1608) mentions the names of Dhiman and his son Vitpala, the master sculptors and painters of the period of Dharmapala and Devapala. In many Vajrayana and Tantrayana Buddhist manuscripts appear the beautiful paintings of the Buddhist gods and goddesses. The art of painting is manifest in 400 odd paintings that appear in the so far discovered 24 painted manuscripts of Pancharaksa, Astasahasrika Prajnaparamita, Panchavingshatisahasrika Prajnaparamita and other texts. Though limited to manuscript paintings, the art shows a very developed stage and scholars have held that the paintings of the Pala period definitely influenced the Eastern Indian, Tibetan and Nepali paintings of the 14th century.

It is not possible to assess the development of literature in the Pala period. So far only a few literary works have been found. But the prashastis in the numerous Pala copperplates clearly indicate the development of Sanskrit language and poetry. The 9th century work Ramacharitam, composed by poet Abhinanda in the Vaidarbhi style, made a mark in the arena of all-Indian literature. Sandhyakara Nandi, a poet from Varendra, composed his ramacharitam under the patronage of the last known Pala king Madanapala. It was acclaimed as a marvellous poetic work for its unique poetic style and use of words that carry double meaning. The anthologies produced in the Sena period contain many poems composed by 10th and 11th century poets. These poems could find place in the anthologies due to their literary value. These bear ample evidence of literary excellence of the Pala period.

There are evidences of works in different shastras. Gaudapada wrote the famous Gaudapadarika, known as Agamashastra, a very important philosophical work. Shridhara Bhatta of Bhurishresti village of Vardhamana wrote Nyayakandali, Bhatta Bhavadeva of Siddhala village of Birbhum wrote Karmanusthanpaddhati. Bhavadeva was also famous for his smrtishastras. Chakrapani Datta, son of Narayanapala's officer Narayana Datta, authored

a few medical treatises - Chikitsa Sanggraha, Ayurvedadipika, Bhanumati, Shabda Chandrika and Dravyagunasanggraha. The 12th century medical treatise Shabda Pradipa was written by the royal physician Sureshvara, whose father, Bhadreshvara, was Ramapala's physician. Sureshvara's other works include Vrksayurveda and Lohapaddhati. Vangasena, the author of Chikitsasara Sanggraha, and Gadadharavaidya, who wrote the commentary on Sushruta shastra, are considered to have flourished in the Pala period. Jimutavahana contributed to the Dharmashastra literature through his Dayabhaga, Vyavaharamatrka and Kalaviveka. He was born in Paribhadra family of Radha in the 11th or 12th century AD. All these are clear proof of the development literature in the Pala period.

Thus, the long rule of the Pala dynasty for about four centuries bestowed glories on Bengal in various fields of human activities. The Pala rulers as well as the people of Bengal can legitimately claim credit for these glories.

Source- Banglapedia, AM Chowdhury.