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**Traces of Buddhist architecture in Gupta and post-Gupta
Bengal: evidence from inscriptions and literature**

Abstract: This paper discusses the development of Buddhism in Bengal during the Gupta period and their traces in architecture found during the Gupta and post-Gupta periods by considering references made in inscriptions and literature from the period. To do so, religious history of the pre-Gupta, Gupta and post-Gupta periods have been reviewed in the light of the development of Buddhism in Bengal and the related regions. Most probably Bengal came in touch with Buddhism during Buddha's lifetime (c. 563 to 483 BCE). During the time between Buddha and Asoka (ruled 269 to 232 BCE) Buddhism became firmly rooted at the heart of this region so much so that hostile attitudes of some later dynasties could not wipe it out of Bengal. Tolerant outlook of local and regional Brahmin kings during the Guptas allowed Buddhism to flourish which was further boosted in the post-Gupta period by devout followers like the emperor, Harsavardhana, Devakhadga and his son Rajabhata. They supported Buddhist practices in the Samatata area of Bengal. Further, Deva kings enormously contributed towards Buddhist monasteries.

Keywords: architecture, inscriptions, literary studies, Buddhist architecture, Bengal

History of Bengal before the Palas is obscure and archaeological evidences from this period are so scant that academics are struggling to resolve the issues arising from different ideas of the chronology of later Gupta and post Gupta rulers. On the other hand, patronage of the Pala kings towards Buddhism is well known, for which it has become almost customary to assign any medieval Buddhist architectural contributions to the Pala kings to keep those beyond contradiction. As a result, contributions towards Buddhism by other medieval dynasties are rarely expressed or discussed. Though Gupta kings were Hindus, they had a tolerant outlook which allowed Buddhism to flourish. Such a tendency may have continued or even have gained in strength during the post Gupta period. If this was indeed the case, the extant Buddhist architecture and remnants – especially the *vihāras* – could contain traces of these early footsteps.



However, given the state of preservation of the remains, we must look elsewhere. This paper aims to trace indications of continued patronage of the Buddhist *vihāras* of Bengal during Gupta and post Gupta times with reference of extant literature and inscriptions.

Map: Ancient Bengal (Reza 2012)

BENGAL BEFORE THE GUPTAS

To know about the religious state of Bengal during the Guptas, it is important to understand the conditions that existed from the ancient period. The reconstruction of the religious history of Bengal in the ancient period down to the beginning of the Imperial Guptas is again difficult due to

paucity of sources. In most cases we have to depend on very scanty references in the Vedic epic and Puranic literature, where Bengal was known to be inhabited by different groups of people whose names were associated with the area they inhabited. Thus ancient *Vanga*, *Pundra*, *Radha* and *Gauda* came to be recognised as those inhabited by non-Aryan ethnic groups bearing those names. In addition the existence of *Samatata* and *Harikela* is known from later Vedic literature as areas also inhabited by non-Aryan people (Chowdhury 2008).

Most probably these non-Aryan people came in touch with Buddhism during Buddha's life (c. 563 to 483 BCE). Buddha is said to have delivered his first sermon at Saranath and then moved to different places within India including Majjhimadesha or Madhyadesha, and according to Divyavadana the eastern boundary of the Majjhimadesha had extended as far as Pundravardhana (Chakma 2008). Hiuen-tsang¹ confirmed that Asoka (ruled 269 to 232 BCE), the great Mauryan² king, had erected stūpas at various places in Bengal and Orissa to commemorate these visits.

Post-Mauryan epigraphic *Asokavadana*³, discovery of a Mauryan inscription in Brahmi characters at Mahasthan bearing the name '*Pudanagala*' (Pundranagara) and the recovery of Mauryan coins with other artefacts bear testimony that Buddhism had established a powerful footing in Bengal during Asoka's reign. Chinese traveller I-tsing⁴ is said to have noticed Asoka's stūpas in *Tamralipti*, *Karnasuvarna*, *Pundravardhana* and *Samatata*. These Chinese sources give a clear view about Asoka's patronization of Buddhism in Bengal.

After the Maurya, with advent of the Sungas (c. 185 to 73 BCE) Buddhism lost its royal patronage. The once thriving religion went into decline because of the hostile attitude of the Sunga kings towards Buddhism and the *Sangha*.⁵ However, a terracotta tablet found at *Tamralipti* referred to the continued existence of Buddhism in Bengal during the Sunga period. The continued existence of Buddhism during the Sungas is plausible given the well-known situation that from Buddha to Asoka the religion became so deeply rooted within the non-Aryan population that the hostile attitude of some of the Sunga kings could not have possibly wiped it out of Bengal. Some

¹ Hiuen-tsang (c. 602 – 664 CE) was a famous Chinese Buddhist monk, scholar, traveller and translator who visited India and described the interaction between China and India in the early Tang period.

² The Maurya Empire was a geographically extensive and powerful empire in ancient India from 321 to 185 BC. Originating from the kingdom of Magadha in the Indo-Gangetic plains (modern Bihar, eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bengal) on the eastern side of the Indian subcontinent, the empire had its capital city at Pataliputra (modern Patna).

³ *Asokavadana* (Sanskrit: अशोकवदन, "Narrative of Asoka") is a second century CE text related to the legend of the Mauryan Emperor Asoka the Great. The legend was translated into Chinese by Fa Huen in 300 CE.

⁴ I-tsing (c. 635 – 713 CE) was a famous Chinese Buddhist monk, scholar, traveller and translator who visited India during 673-693 CE.

⁵ *Sangha* (Pali: saṅgha; Sanskrit: संघ saṃgha;) is a Pali or Sanskrit word roughly translated as "association with common goal". It is commonly used to refer to Buddhist or Jain group of monks. In Buddhism *Sangha* most commonly means the monastic *sangha* or association of ordained Buddhist monks or nuns.

scholars have also opined that the orthodox Sunga kings were not as intolerant towards Buddhism as many historians have made it appear. Whatever the attitude of the Sungas, the dormant persistence of Buddhism received a further impetus from the Kushanas in the first century AD when Kaniska raised Buddhism once again to the status of a state religion. Discovery of images of Buddha, and coins and inscriptions throw light on the flourishing condition of Buddhism in Bengal during his reign. Like Asoka, he is said to have erected *stūpas* and *chaityas*, built *vihāras* (monasteries) and sent missions abroad (Chakma 2008).

BUDDHISM IN BENGAL DURING GUPTA AND POST GUPTA PERIODS

From the Gupta period onwards we get written records in the form of epigraphic material and literature which contain specific information regarding the religious pattern of Bengal. From these sources it is known that although Gupta emperors were 'Parama-Bhagavatas'⁶, devout adherents of *Bhagabata Vaishnava*, and they revived Brahmanism, they had a tolerant outlook towards Buddhism and that allowed Buddhism to flourish. Testament to the thriving state of Buddhism is present in different sources, including Fa Huen's account. At the same time, the rise of Saivism and Vaisnavism⁷ brought Buddhism closer to Hinduism and injected a new impetus into Buddhism.

The Gupta patronization towards Buddhism can be identified from Maharaja Shri Gupta (c. 240 to 280 CE) – the first ruler of the Gupta dynasty - who built a Buddhist temple and offered it to Buddhist monks from China along with a gift of twenty-four villages, according to Chinese sources. Though the location of this temple cannot yet be identified, many scholars believe that this suggests the rise of Guptas from Bengal; according to this opinion, as well as from the calculations of Mookerji (Mookerji 2007), there is a great chance that the temple was built within Bengal territory.

Another prominent Gupta king, Samudragupta (ruled 335 to 380 CE), despite being a devout worshipper of Vishnu, had proved to be a great patron of Buddhism. His teacher and guide, the celebrated Buddhist scholar Vasubandhu, was appointed minister, and with the permission of the Ceylonese King Meghavanna, a monastery was built at Bodh-Gaya during his reign. It is likely that on the eve of the Gupta expansion under Samudragupta, Bengal remained divided into independent states. By about the middle of the fourth century CE most independent states came

⁶ "Bhagavat" means 'the Adorable One', and "Bhagabata" is 'a worshiper of the Adorable One', In traditional Hinduism "Bhagabata" refers 'worshiper of Krishna' where as Vaishnavas refers it as 'worshiper of Vishnu'.

⁷ Saivism and Vaisnavism have accepted many aspects of Buddhism, a reason why the rise of these two powerful Hindu cults brought Buddhism closer to Hinduism. In its spiritual nihilism, Buddhism approximated the Bhakti movements, so much so that, by the middle of the sixth century CE, the Buddha was accepted as an avatar of Vishnu.

under Samudragupta's rule, except Samatata. His well-structured local administration gave the local representatives authority to play an important role in their development, which helped Buddhism to thrive within the tolerant atmosphere he championed. Chandra Gupta I (c. 319 to 335 CE), who like his father Sri Gupta, was a devout Vaisnava by faith, also gave full freedom to the practice of other faiths in his empire.

Chandragupta II Vikramaditya (ruled 375 to 414 CE) was Vaishnava and took the title of *Paramabhagavata* (sincerest devotee of Vishnu). A prominent minister of Chandragupta gifted land and a sum of money to the community of Buddhist monks called *Arya-Samgha*, who belonged to the great *vihāra* at Kakanadabota (Sanchi). One of the Udaygiri caves bear an inscription of another minister who was a devotee Shiva (Mookerji 2007).

Kumaragupta I Mahendraditya (ruled AD 414 to 455) founded the great monastery of Nalanda, which in the course of time turned into a university and became the greatest centre of Buddhist learning in Asia. Both Hsuan-tsang and the Korean traveller Prajnavarman confirmed the story of its origin (Ramaswami 1971). Though it was situated out of Bengal territory, from an early date the Buddhists of Bengal were closely linked with this great institution. Acharya Dharmapala had been the high priest of this monastery, who was succeeded by his disciple Acharya Shilabhadra, a scion of a Brahmana king of Samatata. Not only scholars from Bengal but also its kings contributed to the development of the great institutions.

Though the foundation of Nalanda monastery was laid at the time of Kumaragupta I, several kings of Gupta dynasty built monasteries of their own flanking the original structure and made it the largest Mahavihāra. Hsuan-tsang mentioned four of these - Buddhagupta, Tathagatagupta, Baladitya and Vajra. According to Heras, Buddhagupta is Skanda Gupta, Tathagatagupta is Pura Gupta, Baladitya is Narasimhagupta and Vajra is Kumaragupta II (Heras 1928).

Skandagupta (ruled 455 to 467 CE) continued the policy of his father Kumaragupta I, as patronage towards Nalanda as well as Buddhism was continued. He built another *sangharama*⁸ to the south of the previous one to enlarge the university. Puragupta also followed his ancestors' practice and built another *sangharama* east of the previous one. Probably his favour for Nalanda was even more than his deceased brother.

Narasimhagupta Baladitya (ruled c. 487 to 540 CE) built another *sangharama* to the northeast side of the one built by his father. Hiuen-tsang resembles it to the great *vihāra* built under the Bodhi tree (Heras 1928). Although the kings of the Gupta dynasty professed the Brahmanical

⁸ Sangharama (सङ्घाराम) is a Sanskrit word means "where the *sangha* (Buddhist monastic community) dwells"; generally, the term, *sangharama* refers to the Buddhist monastery.

faith, Narasimhagupta is said to have received training in his youth under the great Mahayanist philosopher, Vasubandhu (Dutt 2008). According to *Arya-Manjusri-Mulakalpa* Bala (Narasimhagupta) was a Buddhist and he decorated his kingdom with *chaityas* as far as the Bay of Bengal (Jayaswal 1934). When the Huna king, Mihirakula from Malwa declared his purpose to destroy the entire Buddhist priests through the region of the five Indies and to overthrow the law of Buddha, Narshimha strictly guarded the frontiers of his kingdom and refused to pay tribute which led to war. The Huna king entered the kingdom of Magadha and pursued Narasimhagupta till the Bay of Bengal (Beal 1844). In the course of this campaign Mihirakula undoubtedly marched on Pataliputra and continued till the Bay of Bengal. He destroyed all Buddhist buildings that he found in his way and killed all its priests. But Mihirakula was finally defeated by the Gupta army and Narasimhagupta did restore the university to its glory through rebuilding. After restoration was done and construction of his *vihāra* was finished, Narasimha commemorated the event with a great assembly where 10,000 priests flocked to Nalanda from every corner of India and even two monks came from far-off China. At his later age, Narasimha resigned the crown in favour of his son, retiring to the *sangha* (Heras 1928).

Kumaragupta III (ruled around 543 CE), son of Narasimha, again built a *sangharama* on the west side of the previous one (Beal 1844). Although there is controversy over his religion, in all likelihood he also followed his father. Gunaigarh copper plate records a gift of land by Maharaja Vainya Gupta in favour of the Buddhist Sangha of the Mahayana sect.

In the post-Gupta period, according to Hiuen-tsang, Shashanka (ruled c. 600 to 625 CE) was hostile to Buddhism, who ordered the extermination of the Buddhist monks in and around Kushinagara, cut down the holy Bodhi tree of Gaya and threw a sacred stone footprint of the Buddha into the Ganges. He is also said to have removed a Buddha image from a temple close to the Bodhi tree and replaced it with that of Shiva (Heras 1928). *Arya-Manjusri-Mulakalpa* also describes him as a characterless Brahmin king and an enemy of Harsavardhana (Jayaswal 1934). In sharp contrast to Shashanka's alleged persecution of Buddhists and antagonism towards Buddhism, the flourishing condition of the Buddhist University at Nalanda during this period, the existence of a number of monasteries within Shashanka's kingdom – including the Raktamrttika-

Mahavihāra near Karnasuvarna (the capital city of Shashanka), provides indication of his tolerant attitude towards Buddhism (Bhattacharyya 2008).⁹

The reign of Emperor Harsavardhana (590 to 647 CE) was one of resurgence and renewed progress and development of Buddhism. Despite being a worshipper of Shiva and Surya, Harsa had great leanings towards Buddhism from his elder brother (Rajyavardhana) and sister Rajyashri, who were both devout Buddhists. Gradually he became a great patron of Buddhism, at first becoming a devotee of the Hinayana sect and in later life an ardent follower of the Mahayana path. As a devout Buddhist he gave Buddhism a new impetus; his somewhat anti-Brahmanical attitude despaired the followers of the Brahmanical religion, who began to migrate to eastern India in large numbers. Hiuen-tsang mentioned a large influx of learned Brahmanas into Kamarupa, who were granted land by the king, Bhaskaravarman for their settlement. The Kulaji texts also noted the influx of Kanauji Brahmanas into Bengal, possibly at the invitation of Shashanka (Bhattacharyya 2008).

Some of Harsa's notable contributions towards Buddhism include erecting *stupas* on the banks of the Ganges, building monasteries at places sacred to Buddhism, and forbidding the slaying of animals. Another of his important contributions to Buddhism was his convening regularly the convocation. Harsa used to summon Buddhist monks once a year for religious discussions. He was especially attached to Nalanda and extended help liberally. Hiuen-tsang also enjoyed the patronage of Harsa during his visit to India (Chakma 2008).

The Kailan copper plate supplies a variety of interesting information regarding Rata dynasty of ancient Samatata. Shridharana Rata, the second ruler of the dynasty, issued land for charitable purposes to Buddhist organisations as well as Brahmins (Rashid 2008). The inscription also mentions that the ruling king, Shridharana Rata was Parama-Vaisnava. But his contribution towards Buddhist organization proves not only his religious tolerance, but also his actual devotion towards Buddhist development (Khan 2004).

⁹ According to Banabhatta's *Harsha Charita*, Sasanka entered Magadha as a friend of Rajyavardhana, but in secret alliance with the Malwa King he murdered Rajyavardhana. Most probably on this occasion he destroyed the sacred places of Buddhism in Magadha as referred to by Hiuen tsang. Although the *Arya-Manjusri-Mulakalpa* describes him as an enemy of Harsavardhana, it does not mention any destruction of Buddhist shrines by him.

After Harsavardhana, the Khadga dynasty is said to be the first Buddhist dynasty to rule an independent Bengal between the seventh and the eighth centuries CE. The Chinese monk Shengchi, who visited Samatata in the latter half of the seventh century CE, mentions Rajabhata as its king and describes him as an ardent worshipper of the three gems (*triratna*, i.e., the Buddha, *dhamma* and the *sangha*). During his pilgrimage visits he founded monasteries, supporting monks in the Samatata. Further, he stated that the king gave to the monks and nuns offerings for their maintenance; every morning on behalf of the king an officer was sent to the monastery to ask after the welfare of the resident monks, including Shengche.

The copper plate of Balabhata, another son of Devakhadga, describes land grants towards the maintenance and renovation of *vihāras* and *stupas*. Two Ashrafpur copperplate inscriptions also describe land donations by both Devakhadga and his son, Rajabhata towards Buddhist development (Islam 2008). These suggest that during the reign of the Khadga kings Buddhism continued to flourish in Bengal in the seventh century CE.

However, the presence of the left facing bull and absence of the *dharmachakra* (the Wheel of Law) in Ashrafpur copper-plate also furnishes an indication of Shaiva leanings of the dynasty. Contributions by Devakhadga's queen, Prabhavati towards providing a cover of gold leaves for the goddess, Shavani, and Balabhata's title, *paramashesvara* (an epithet of Siva) on Deulbadi image inscription, also indicates them as worshipper of Siva. Probably, the overt Shaiva leanings of this dynasty was an act towards stabilising Khadga royal power in the newly conquered area of Samatata (Ray 2008).

As yet the four identified inscriptions of the Deva dynasty does not provide any information regarding religious inclination of Shantideva and Bhirdeva, the first and second rulers of the Deva dynasty. However, their presence in their ancestor, Anandadeva & Bhavadeva's Salban *vihāra* copperplate inscription indicates their religious affiliation.

Anandadeva & Bhavadeva's Salban *vihāra* copperplate refers to the former as '*Paramasaugata*' – meaning a devotee of Buddha, the first king of Bengal to assume the title. His seal attached to this copperplate bear the '*dharmachakramudra*' (the Wheel of Law flanked by two seated bear). He was the first king of Bengal who attached such a seal to his copperplate, which was also adopted by his successor. Anandadeva is also credited with the issuing of coins titling himself as '*Bangal-Mriganka*', and to publicise Buddhist religion and culture to the peoples of his country (Khan 2003).

Anandadeva & Bhavadeva's Salban *vihāra* copperplate further refers contribution of Bhavadeva towards a Buddhist *viharika*. His title, '*Avinaba-Mriganka*' indicates his religious devotion towards Buddhism. He followed his father to attach '*dharmachakramudra*' seal to his copperplates.

Ananda *vihāra* copperplate provides proof of his contribution towards Vendamoti Viharika. His 'Shri-Bhavadeva Maha Vihāra arya-bhiksusangghasya' proves continuation of Buddhist religious and cultural development during Deva dynasty.

Buddhist inscriptions, seals, images and manuscripts in Gupta characters, discovered from different archaeological excavations, testify that both Hinayana and Mahayana sects continued to flourish simultaneously during the Gupta period. The flourishing state of the early Hinayana schools, namely Sarvastivadins, Sammatiyas or Vatsiputriyas and Sthavirvadins, were present at the early period; however, Hinayana gradually lost its hold and gave way to Mahayana. Scope for devotion and worship as well as the laity of Mahayana practice began to capture the imagination of the common people and became an important religious movement. With the development of Mahayana, the worship of Bodhisattva images along with the image of the Buddha turned into a common practice (Chakma 2008).

TRACES OF BUDDHIST ARCHITECTURE IN GUPTA AND POST-GUPTA BENGAL

Chinese travellers' accounts are a major source which provide many traces of Gupta and post-Gupta *vihāras* in Bengal. Fa-hien (ca. 337 – 422 CE), who visited India around 399-414 CE, described that, while some of the old Buddhist centres, like Kapilavastu and Saraswati, were in a neglected and ruinous state, Pataliputra, Mathura, Bodh-gaya, Sarnath and Nalanda were flourishing as active centres of Buddhism (Chakma 2008). Fa-hien's account suggests that none of the sites in Bengal were flourishing as well as Nalanda did during this period to be considered an active centre of Buddhism. Fa-hien, however, is said to have travelled eastward from Pataliputra along the course of the Ganges, coming across Buddhist *stupas* and monks at various locations. In Tamralipti, in Bengal, he is said to have spent two years and visited twenty-two monasteries (Legge 1886) inhabited by monks who lived in accordance with the Buddhist *vinaya* (Ramachandran 1951).

Hiuen-tsang (ca. 602- 664 CE), visited India around 630-645 CE, visited almost all the major centres associated with Buddhism in India. At Pundravardhana he is said to have found twenty Buddhist monasteries with more than 3,000 monks who practised both Hinayana and Mahayana paths. The magnificent Po-shi-po was occupied by over 700 monks and was located in the vicinity of the capital of Pundravardhana. He describes its court as light and roomy, its towers and pavilions as very lofty. There is also mention of another *vihāra* with an image of *Kwan-tsz'-tsai* Avalokitesvara not far from this establishment, which attracted visitors from far and near (Beal 1844). In Samatata he found more than thirty Buddhist monasteries with about 2,000 priests of the Sthavira School. In the vicinity of the capital of Samatata, he describes the existence of a *stupa* built by king Ashok and a *vihāra* which contained a figure of Buddha in green Jade of eight

feet height. At Tamralipti he found ten Buddhist monasteries with about 1,000 monks, while at Karnasuvarna he found more than ten Buddhist monasteries with about 2,000 priests; three of these *vihāras* were followers of Devadatta. In the vicinity of the capital there was a *vihāra* named Lo-to-wei-chi (Raktaviti). He also described its halls as light and spacious and its multi-storeyed towers as very lofty. A *stupa* built by king Ashok was not far from it and another *vihāra* was adjacent to that *stupa*.

I-tsing, who visit India during 673-693 CE, remained in Tamralipti for five months to learn Sanskrit and the science of word. I-tsing's account notes that as many as fifty-six Buddhist priests from China and its neighbouring areas visited India in the latter half of the seventh century CE. While at Tamralipti he met Ta-cheng-teng, another distinguished Chinese scholar, in a *vihāra* called Po-lo-ho. Ta-cheng-teng lived at Tamralipti for twelve years to study Sanskrit Buddhist texts (Ramachandran 1951). Another monk, Sheng-chi, who visited Samatata, mentions that there were 30 monasteries with more than 4,000 monks in Samatata alone during his pilgrimage (Chakma 2008).

Chinese sources also give us the first trace of a *vihāra* built by any Gupta king. Fa-hien informs that, Maharaja Sri Gupta, the first ruler of the Gupta dynasty, built a Buddhist temple near Mrigasikhavana and offered it to Buddhist monks from China along with a gift of twenty-four villages. I-tsing further reports that the aforesaid park was about 50 stages east of Nalanda down the Ganges. Counting I-tsing's each stage as 5 or 6 miles, the aforesaid temple would have been a distance of 250 to 300 miles from Nalanda (Mookerji 2007), and probably within Bengal. This temple is believed to have remained a sacred place until the seventh century AD. *Arya-Manjusri-Mulakalpa* records that Narasimhagupta Baladitya decorated his kingdom with *chaityas* up to the Bay of Bengal as well as he built monasteries all over his empire (Jayaswal 1934).

Inscriptions are also another source to trace *vihāras* of Gupta and post-Gupta periods. The Paharpur copper plate inscription from the Gupta year 159 (479 CE) records a land grant for Vatoguhali Vihāra. The plate records the purchase and grant of a piece of land by a Brahmana couple in the fifth century AD for the maintenance and the worship of Arhats under a Jaina teacher, Guhanandin and a resting place at the *vihāra* which was situated at Vatagohali. Probably the *vihāra* was a locally reputed establishment of Pundravardhana (Dasgupta 2005).

Gunaigarh copper plate records a gift of land by Maharaja Vainya Gupta in favour of the Buddhist Avaivarttika Sangha of the Mahayana sect. The Sangha, founded by the Acharya Shantideva, was housed in a monastery called, Ashrama Vihāra, dedicated to Avalokiteshvara. The inscription also refers to other Buddhist monasteries, one of which was known as Raja Vihāra, which can be literally translated as the Royal Vihāra (Chakma 2008).

The Kailan copper plate inscription of Sridharan Rata supplies information regarding land donation towards Buddhist organization in Guptinatana (in or near Mainamati) and Patalyika visayas of Samatat. That is the only sign which shows any Rata kings participation toward Buddhist *vihāra*.

Salban Vihāra copper plate of Balabhata, son of Devakhadga, describes him as having granted land in the area of Dhanalaksmipataka (unidentified) for maintenance and renovation of *vihāras* and *stupas*. The plate refers to a *mahabhogashrama*, probably suggesting an *asrama* where grand religious festivals were held. The *vihāras* were apparently eight in number and in them the Parimitamatam and Danachandrika were discussed (Islam 2008).

The Chinese monk, Sheng-Che visited Samatata during the reign of Rajabhata, son of Devakhadga; the *vihāra* where Sheng- Che lived was Rajavihāra. The king is said to have given to the monks and nuns, including Sheng-che, offerings for their maintenance. It has been suggested that this Rajavihāra may have been the one mentioned also in the Gunaighar Copper plate of Vainyagupta (Ray 2008). Ashrafpur copper plates of Devakhadga throws light on more *vihāras*. According to these, Devakhadga and his son Rajabhata both donated land to Sanghamitra in favour of four *vihāras* and *viharikas*. Probably they did not get new monasteries constructed; rather brought existing establishments within a single campus to make it a sacred landscape (Islam 2008).

The Salban *vihāra* copperplate of Anandadeva and Bhavadeva describes land grant towards a temple in Samatata. Although no other indications are provided to identify it as a Buddhist temple (Khan 2003), Anandadevas known devotion towards Buddhism increases the possibility of it being a Buddhist *vihāra*.

Three seals from Salban Vihāra refers to it as ‘*Shri-Bhavadeva Maha Vihāra arya-bhiksusangghasya*’ (Hossain and Dewan 2004). Bhavadeva, the third ruler of the Deva dynasty, was also a donor of land for another *viharika* according to the Salban *vihāra* copperplate. Anandavihar copperplate refers to Bhavadeva’s contribution towards another *viharika* at Vendamoti.

CONCLUSION

This short discussion regarding the traces of Gupta and post-Gupta *vihāras* of Bengal through inscriptions and literature is certainly inadequate to provide a comprehensive picture. However, it leaves little doubt that there were numerous *vihāras* in Bengal during the centuries spanning the Gupta rule and the subsequent rulers of Bengal, both the important and less significant ones. It is important to note that, contrary to generally held views, significant contributions towards Buddhist *vihāras* by post-Gupta regional and local rulers shows a remarkable and continued presence of Buddhism in Bengal. In conclusion, it can be said that Bengal during the Gupta and

the post-Gupta period had seen the maintenance – and even construction of many notable
vihāras.

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