



Voices from the East: Revisiting the Buddhist Heritage of Bihar, Bengal, and Odisha

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Abstract

Eastern India—comprising the regions of Bihar, Bengal, and Odisha—has long been a vibrant epicenter of Buddhist philosophy, pilgrimage, and monastic education. This article revisits the multifaceted heritage of Buddhism in these regions, drawing upon archaeological, literary, and art-historical sources to unearth the diverse "voices" that shaped and sustained the religion across centuries. From Bodh Gaya's sacred Bodhi Tree to the sprawling university complex of Nalanda, and from the esoteric tantric centers of Ratnagiri to the lyrical Charyapada verses of Bengal's Siddhacharyas, the eastern landscape is saturated with religious memory. The article also examines the crucial role of royal patronage—from the Mauryas to the Palas and the Bhauma-Karas—in nurturing Buddhist institutions. These voices, once nearly silenced by the religion's decline, have re-emerged through rediscovery and global revival. By engaging with these regional narratives, the study highlights Eastern India's vital yet often overlooked contributions to the Buddhist world and emphasizes the need to preserve and recontextualize its enduring legacy.

Keywords: 1. Buddhism in Eastern India 2. Nalanda University 3. Vikramashila Monastery 4. Buddhist art and architecture 5. Odisha Buddhist sites 6. Pala dynasty patronage 7. Decline and revival of Buddhism 8. Bodh Gaya heritage 9. Buddhist pilgrimage circuit 10. Archaeological rediscovery of Buddhism

Introduction

For over two millennia, Eastern India has echoed with the footsteps of monks, the chants of pilgrims, and the philosophical inquiries of seekers. This land—encompassing the present-day states of **Bihar, West Bengal, and Odisha**—was not only a sacred geography of the Buddha's life and teachings, but also a crucible for the evolution of Mahayana and Vajrayana traditions. These regions served as a **spiritual laboratory**, where doctrine, ritual, art, and poetry flourished under the auspices of both devout communities and powerful dynasties. The phrase "*Voices from the East*" in this article's title is both literal and metaphorical. It refers to the **spoken, sung, carved,**



and written legacies left behind by monks, scholars, pilgrims, poets, and kings. These voices include the **architectural brilliance** of Mahabodhi Temple in Bodh Gaya; the **intellectual radiance** of Nalanda and Vikramashila universities; the **poetic mysticism** of the Bengali *Siddhacharyas*; and the **tantric imagery** found in the monasteries of Ratnagiri and Udayagiri.¹ While much scholarly attention has focused on Buddhism's pan-Indian or transnational dimensions, this study aims to **recentre the regional narrative**, emphasizing how local patronage, cultural exchange, and artistic expression sustained Buddhism in the eastern heartland. It re-evaluates the roles of the **Mauryan, Gupta, Pala, and Bhauma-Kara** dynasties, whose political support ensured the construction of monuments, propagation of teachings, and preservation of scriptures.

Equally important is the **decline and rediscovery** of these voices. The medieval collapse of Buddhist institutions due to political and religious shifts led to centuries of silence. However, archaeological efforts in the 19th and 20th centuries, along with modern initiatives such as the revival of Nalanda University, have helped reawaken global awareness of this heritage.

This article, therefore, seeks not only to **revisit** the Buddhist past of Eastern India but also to **amplify** its historical and cultural significance for contemporary scholarship and heritage conservation².

Bihar: The Cradle of the Dhamma: Bihar, often referred to as the **birthplace of organized Buddhism**, holds a sacred and foundational place in the religion's history. It was here, under the **Bodhi Tree at Bodh Gaya**, that Siddhartha Gautama attained enlightenment and became the Buddha around the 6th century BCE. This event marked the beginning of a spiritual movement that would eventually spread across Asia and beyond. The region later became a vibrant hub for Buddhist philosophy, education, and pilgrimage for more than a millennium.

Bodh Gaya: The Site of Enlightenment- Bodh Gaya is arguably the **holiest site in Buddhism**, where the Buddha meditated and realized the Four Noble Truths. Emperor Ashoka, the great Mauryan ruler and patron of Buddhism, visited Bodh Gaya around 250 BCE and is credited with erecting the **Diamond Throne (Vajrasana)** and building a stupa on the site. The current **Mahabodhi Temple**, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, stands as a testimony to centuries of religious devotion and architectural excellence. Ashoka's patronage also included the erection of **pillars inscribed with edicts**, promoting dharma and Buddhist values. His contributions laid the groundwork for the **spread of Buddhism** not only across the Indian subcontinent but also to Sri Lanka, Central Asia, and Southeast Asia.³

¹ Chakravarti, N. P. (1980). *A descriptive catalogue of the Pali manuscripts in the Central Library, Baroda*. Baroda: Maharaja Sayajirao University.p.25.

² Dutt, N. (1962). *Buddhism in East India*. Calcutta: Firma K. L. Mukhopadhyay.p.124.

³ Huntington, S. L. (1985). *The art of ancient India: Buddhist, Hindu, Jain*. New York: Weatherhill.p.65.



Nalanda: A Beacon of Buddhist Learning—Located in modern-day Nalanda district, the **Nalanda Mahavihara** emerged as one of the world's earliest residential universities around the 5th century CE. At its peak, Nalanda housed over **10,000 students and 2,000 teachers**, attracting scholars from China, Korea, Tibet, and Southeast Asia. Famous Chinese pilgrim **Xuanzang (Hsüan-tsang)** spent several years studying and teaching at Nalanda in the 7th century and described it as a flourishing intellectual centre. Disciplines ranged from **Buddhist philosophy and logic to astronomy, grammar, and medicine**. Nalanda also played a key role in the development and transmission of **Mahayana Buddhism** and early **Vajrayana practices**.

Vikramashila and Odantapuri: The Later Flamebearers— During the Pala dynasty (8th–12th centuries CE), Bihar remained a stronghold of Buddhist learning through the foundation of **Vikramashila Mahavihara** by King Dharmapala and **Odantapuri** by King Gopala. Vikramashila became especially renowned for its **Tantric Buddhist curriculum**, and its scholars like **Atisha Dipankara** later helped revive Buddhism in Tibet. These monasteries functioned not only as educational centers but also as **cultural bridges**, connecting Indian Buddhism with Tibet and East Asia through the translation of texts and movement of scholars.

Decline and Legacy: The decline of these institutions began with the **Turkic invasions** in the 12th century, especially the destruction of Nalanda by Bakhtiyar Khilji around 1193 CE. This effectively ended the centuries-old tradition of Buddhist scholarship in Bihar. However, their legacy survives through **archaeological remains, traveler accounts, and the global transmission of Buddhist teachings**. Modern excavations at Nalanda and Vikramashila have rekindled academic interest, leading to the inclusion of **Nalanda in UNESCO's World Heritage list (2016)** and the establishment of a new Nalanda University as a symbol of intellectual revival.

Bengal: Tantric Poets and Scholarly Bridges: While Bihar nurtured the foundational and scholastic pillars of Buddhism, **ancient Bengal**—especially during the Pala period (8th–12th centuries CE)—emerged as a **crucial center for the development and dissemination of Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism**. Bengal's unique contribution lies not only in its monastic institutions but also in the flourishing of esoteric Buddhist thought, tantric practices, and mystical poetry that transcended the conventional boundaries of doctrine.⁴

The Pala Dynasty: Torchbearers of Tantric Buddhism: The Pala kings, starting with **Gopala** and reaching their zenith under **Dharmapala** and **Devapala**, were ardent patrons of Buddhism. Their rule saw the **construction of monumental mahaviharas** (great monasteries) and the **promotion of Vajrayana Buddhism**, often intertwined with local traditions. Major monastic

⁴ Majumdar, R. C. (1971). *History of Bengal (Vol. 1)*. Dacca: Dacca University Press.p.147.



centers in Bengal included: **Jagaddala Mahavihara** (in present-day Rajshahi, Bangladesh), **Somapura Mahavihara** (a UNESCO World Heritage site, also in Bangladesh), **Vikrampur, Pandita Vihara, and Halud Vihara**. These monasteries served as **intellectual satellites** to Nalanda and Vikramashila, maintaining academic and philosophical exchanges with scholars from Tibet, China, and Southeast Asia.

Charyapada: The Esoteric Voice of the Siddhas: Bengal's most distinctive Buddhist expression emerged in the **Charyapada**—a collection of mystical and symbolic verses composed between the 8th and 12th centuries CE by **Siddhacharyas** or Mahasiddhas. These poets, including **Sarahapada, Luipa, Kukkuripa, Bhusukupada**, and others, composed songs that conveyed tantric teachings in **coded, metaphoric language**.

The Charyapada is significant for multiple reasons:

- It represents the **earliest known form of Eastern Indo-Aryan languages**, and is considered a precursor to Bengali, Assamese, and Odia.
- The songs blend **tantric philosophy with daily life metaphors**, suggesting an attempt to democratize spiritual practice.
- It reflects a **radical egalitarian and anti-ritualistic ethos**, challenging Brahmanical orthodoxy.

Bengal-Tibet Scholarly Exchange: One of the most celebrated figures linking Bengal to trans-Himalayan Buddhism is **Atisha Dipankara Shrijnana** (980–1054 CE), born in Vikrampur (near Dhaka). A scholar of Nalanda and Vikramashila, Atisha played a vital role in **reviving Buddhism in Tibet**, laying the foundation for the Kadampa school, which influenced later Tibetan traditions like the Gelugpa. Atisha's journey to Tibet exemplifies Bengal's role as a **bridge between Indian and Tibetan Buddhism**—translating, preserving, and transmitting complex texts on Madhyamaka philosophy, tantric rituals, and monastic discipline.⁵

Decline and Lingering Influence: Like Bihar, Bengal's Buddhist institutions declined following **Turkic invasions** and the **rise of Brahmanical Hinduism and Islam**. However, the **Buddhist spirit never fully vanished**. The Charyapada survives as an essential cultural and linguistic legacy, and remnants of monasteries and sculptures are found across West Bengal and Bangladesh.

Today, Buddhist communities such as the **Baruas in Bangladesh and the Chakmas in North Bengal** still trace their spiritual lineage to this rich past.

Odisha: Vajrayana's Artistic Sanctuaries: In the sacred geography of Buddhism in Eastern India, **Odisha** (ancient Kalinga, Utkala, and Odra) stands out as a **stronghold of Vajrayana Buddhism**, celebrated for its **artistic grandeur, tantric symbolism, and architectural innovation**. The region's historical connection with Buddhism spans from the time of Emperor

⁵ Ray, H. P. (2019). *Buddhism and Gandhara: An archaeological approach*. New Delhi: Routledge India.p.111.



Ashoka to the later **Bhauama-Kara and Somavamshi dynasties**, who fostered a rich tradition of esoteric Buddhism marked by distinctive iconography and temple architecture.

Kalinga and Ashokan Legacy: Odisha's Buddhist roots trace back to the **3rd century BCE**, when Emperor Ashoka, after the **Kalinga War (c. 261 BCE)**, renounced violence and embraced Buddhism. Ashokan edicts discovered at **Dhauli** near Bhubaneswar express remorse and advocate for *Dhamma*. The **Dhauli Peace Pagoda (Shanti Stupa)**, built in the 20th century by the Japanese Buddhist order Nipponzan Myohoji, commemorates this historical transformation. This early phase sowed the seeds for the later flourishing of Buddhism in the region, although it would be several centuries before Odisha reached its zenith in Buddhist expression.⁶

Ratnagiri, Udayagiri, and Lalitgiri: The Tri-Ratna of Odisha: Between the 7th and 12th centuries CE, Odisha witnessed a **resplendent phase of Vajrayana and Tantric Buddhist activity**, especially under the patronage of the **Bhauama-Karas** and later the **Somavamshis**. The **Diamond Triangle of Ratnagiri, Udayagiri, and Lalitgiri**, located in the Jajpur district, became the epicenter of monastic life, tantric ritual, and artistic creativity.

◆ **Ratnagiri**

Often considered the most important of the three, Ratnagiri was a **prominent center of Vajrayana and Kalachakra traditions**. Excavations have revealed:

Exquisite images of **Tara, Manjusri, Avalokiteshvara**, and other tantric deities. A grand **monastic complex with intricately carved doorways**, votive stupas, and massive Buddha statues. Presence of **prajnaparamita manuscripts**, indicating advanced philosophical and tantric studies.

◆ **Udayagiri**

Udayagiri, literally meaning "sunrise hill", reveals **residential and ritual structures**, including stupas, monasteries, and sculptures that reflect the synthesis of **Buddhist and indigenous motifs**. It likely functioned as a **residential complex for monks** and had strong ties with both Ratnagiri and Lalitgiri.

◆ **Lalitgiri**

This is the oldest among the three, with origins dating to the **1st century CE**. The site contains a large **stupa**, monastic cells, and a relic casket believed to enshrine **Buddha's tooth relic**—placing it among the most sacred Buddhist sites in India.

Art, Tantra, and Iconography: Odisha's Buddhist art is deeply infused with **Vajrayana and Tantric symbolism**, including multi-armed deities, fierce protective icons like **Heruka and Vajrapani**, and ritual objects like **vajras (thunderbolts)** and **ghantas (bells)**. The stone sculptures

⁶ Singh, U. (2008). *A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India: From the Stone Age to the 12th Century*. New Delhi: Pearson Education.



from these sites represent **a fusion of aesthetic grace and metaphysical depth**, with strong influence on later Hindu iconography in Odisha.⁷

Cultural Continuity and Modern Rediscovery: Although Buddhist institutions declined with the advent of **Shaivism, Vaishnavism**, and later **Islamic incursions**, their influence lingered. Many Buddhist deities were **assimilated into the Hindu pantheon**, and Buddhist ritual elements persisted in regional traditions.

In the 20th century, large-scale archaeological excavations—especially by the **Archaeological Survey of India (ASI)**—brought Ratnagiri, Udayagiri, and Lalitgiri back to scholarly and public attention. The **Buddhist Circuit of Odisha** has since gained prominence in heritage tourism and global Buddhist pilgrimage networks.

Pilgrimage, Education, and Cultural Exchange: The rise and expansion of Buddhism in Eastern India—especially in **Bihar, Bengal, and Odisha**—were deeply intertwined with networks of **pilgrimage, education, and transregional cultural exchange**. These elements not only reinforced the vitality of Buddhism within India but also projected its influence across Asia, making Eastern India a spiritual and intellectual hub for centuries.

Buddhist Pilgrimage: Sacred Geography of the East: Eastern India became dotted with **sacred Buddhist sites**, attracting pilgrims from across the Indian subcontinent and beyond:

Bodh Gaya in Bihar, the place of Buddha's enlightenment, became the **most revered site** of pilgrimage for Buddhists. **Nalanda and Vikramashila** emerged as spiritual destinations for those seeking not only merit through pilgrimage but also **advanced learning**. The **Diamond Triangle** in Odisha—**Ratnagiri, Udayagiri, and Lalitgiri**—served both as centers of devotion and tantric ritual pilgrimage. **Sites like Somapura Mahavihara and Jagaddala** in Bengal were also key stops on the sacred journey of both Indian and foreign devotees. Pilgrims from **China (e.g., Xuanzang, Faxian), Tibet, Nepal, Southeast Asia, and Sri Lanka** journeyed to these sites, often staying for years to study, meditate, and collect relics and scriptures.

Monastic Universities: Global Centers of Buddhist Learning: The **Mahaviharas (great monastic universities)** of Eastern India—especially Nalanda, Vikramashila, Somapura, Odantapuri, and Jagaddala—formed an **interconnected network of scholarly exchange** and religious instruction:

- **Curriculum** included Buddhist philosophy (Abhidharma, Madhyamaka, Yogachara), logic (Hetuvidya), grammar, astronomy, medicine, and metaphysics.
- **Language of instruction** was mainly Sanskrit, but local dialects and Prakrits were also used.

⁷ Scharfe, H. (2002). *Education in Ancient India*. Leiden: Brill Academic.p.225.



- The Mahaviharas played a pivotal role in developing and spreading **Mahayana and Vajrayana doctrines**.

These universities attracted thousands of students from Tibet, China, Korea, Java, and Sumatra, many of whom later **translated Sanskrit texts into their native languages**, enabling the **global diffusion of Buddhism**.

Tibet and the Bengali Connection: Atisha's Mission: The case of **Atisha Dipankara Shrijnana**, a scholar from Bengal, is illustrative of the cultural bridge between Eastern India and Tibet: Atisha studied at **Nalanda and Vikramashila**, mastering both exoteric and esoteric Buddhist teachings. Invited to Tibet in the 11th century, he reformed Tibetan Buddhism and established the **Kadampa school**, a forerunner to the **Gelugpa tradition** of the Dalai Lamas.

Atisha's journey symbolizes how **Buddhist knowledge flowed from East India to the trans-Himalayan world**, often through structured missionary and monastic networks.

Manuscript Culture and Artistic Exchange:

Eastern Indian monasteries were centers of **manuscript production**, preservation, and translation: **Palm-leaf manuscripts**, often stored in decorated book shrines, were produced and exported to Tibet and Southeast Asia. **Scriptures such as the Prajnaparamita, Avatamsaka, and Guhyasamaja Tantras** were disseminated through these networks. Artistic motifs—like multi-armed deities, mandalas, and stupas—traveled with monks and artisans to **Java, Cambodia, and Thailand**. Tibetan Buddhist art, especially from the **11th–14th centuries**, bears the unmistakable **influence of the Pala-Sena style** of Bengal and Bihar, showcasing the far-reaching cultural imprint of the region.⁸

Decline, Rediscovery, and the Modern Voice: The vibrant Buddhist tradition of Eastern India, once home to some of the world's greatest monasteries and centers of learning, eventually witnessed a **gradual decline** due to a combination of **political upheavals, changing religious patronage, and invasions**. However, its rediscovery in the colonial period and revival in modern times has led to a **reawakening of interest** in its legacy and message.

The Decline: Political Turmoil and Cultural Displacement: By the **12th century CE**, the Buddhist institutions of Bihar, Bengal, and Odisha began to decline sharply. The major factors included: **Turkic-Muslim invasions** in the 12th and 13th centuries, particularly those led by **Bakhtiyar Khilji**, resulted in the **destruction of key monastic universities** like **Nalanda, Vikramashila, and Odantapuri**. These centers, unfortified and primarily religious, were ill-prepared for military assault. The **decline of royal patronage**, especially with the fall of the **Pala and Sena dynasties**, weakened institutional support for monastic education and public religious life. The **rise of Brahmanical Hinduism and Bhakti movements**, as well as **Islam**, altered the

⁸ Dutt, N. (1962). *Buddhism in East India*. Calcutta: Firma K. L. Mukhopadhyay.p.402.



religious demographics, pushing Buddhism to the margins of Indian society. In Odisha, the **assimilation of Buddhist deities into the Hindu pantheon** also contributed to a loss of distinct Buddhist identity. Though Buddhism survived in certain pockets—like among the **Baruas of Bengal** or **Chakmas of Chittagong**—its mainstream visibility faded.⁹

Colonial Rediscovery: Archaeology and Awareness: The 19th and early 20th centuries marked a turning point with the **rediscovery of India's Buddhist past** through British colonial archaeology: **Sir Alexander Cunningham**, the first Director General of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), conducted surveys and excavations at sites such as **Sarnath, Bodh Gaya,** and **Nalanda**. **Joseph Beglar** and other ASI officials further documented the remains of monasteries in Bihar and Odisha, including **Udayagiri, Ratnagiri, Lalitgiri,** and **Vikramashila**. The **decipherment of Brahmi script** by **James Prinsep** helped in interpreting Ashokan inscriptions, confirming the deep historical roots of Buddhism in the region. These efforts brought global academic attention to Eastern India's Buddhist legacy and inspired **scholars, monks, and reformers** in India and abroad.

Modern Revival: Heritage, Education, and Identity: The 20th and 21st centuries have witnessed a **significant revival of Buddhist heritage** in Eastern India, both in terms of **religious practice** and **historical consciousness**: **Bodh Gaya**, the place of Buddha's enlightenment, has been declared a **UNESCO World Heritage Site**. The **Mahabodhi Temple Complex** attracts millions of pilgrims annually from across the Buddhist world. **Modern Nalanda University**, inspired by the ancient seat of learning, was re-established in 2010 as an international academic institution with support from several Asian countries. State-sponsored heritage tourism initiatives and the creation of the **"Buddhist Circuit"** in Bihar and Odisha have enhanced conservation and public awareness. The **Dalai Lama and the Tibetan government-in-exile**, as well as **Theravada communities from Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia**, continue to contribute to the spiritual renewal of these sites. **Museums at Nalanda, Ratnagiri, and Konark** now preserve thousands of Buddhist sculptures and artifacts for public viewing and scholarly research.¹⁰

This revival is not just about monuments, but also about **reclaiming a forgotten chapter of India's spiritual and intellectual history**, and recognizing Buddhism's enduring relevance in the modern world.

Conclusion: A Living Legacy: The story of Buddhism in Eastern India is not merely a historical narrative; it is a **living legacy** that continues to resonate through **art, architecture, memory, rituals, and heritage tourism**. From the quiet ruins of Nalanda to the vibrant rituals at Bodh Gaya,

⁹ Singh, U. (2008). *A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India: From the Stone Age to the 12th Century*. New Delhi: Pearson Education.p.222.

¹⁰ Beal, S. (1884). *Si-Yu-Ki: Buddhist records of the Western world (Vol. 1 & 2)*. London: Trübner & Co.p.209.



the voices of the past still echo through the present, inviting reflection, reverence, and renewed scholarship.

Eastern India—particularly **Bihar, Bengal, and Odisha**—was not only a cradle of Buddhist thought but also a **global center of spiritual exchange, philosophical innovation, and artistic brilliance**. Its monasteries attracted seekers from across Asia, and its teachings helped shape the intellectual contours of Buddhism in Tibet, Southeast Asia, and beyond.¹¹

Even after the decline of monastic institutions and the fading of Buddhism from the mainstream religious landscape of the region, its **cultural imprints remained**—in stone carvings, in ritual forms absorbed into local traditions, and in the collective memory of communities.

Today, in the age of global heritage consciousness and intercultural dialogue, this rich Buddhist inheritance demands **renewed attention and responsible stewardship**:

Scholars must continue to research and reinterpret Eastern India's Buddhist past with interdisciplinary perspectives. **Governments and institutions** should invest in the **preservation and restoration** of monuments, manuscripts, and artifacts. **Local communities** need to be empowered as **custodians of their heritage**, integrating Buddhist history into educational and tourism frameworks. **Global Buddhist pilgrims and practitioners** must be encouraged to engage meaningfully with these sacred sites—not merely as tourists, but as participants in a shared historical and spiritual journey.¹²

In doing so, we ensure that the **voices from the East**—the chants of monks, the wisdom of philosophers, the creativity of artisans—are not silenced by time, but **reawakened as part of a universal human story**. The Buddhist heritage of Eastern India is not just India's treasure; it is a **gift to the world**, offering insights into peace, learning, compassion, and cultural synthesis.

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¹¹ Mitra, D. (1958). *Ratnagiri*. Memoirs of the Archaeological Survey of India, No. 78. New Delhi: ASI.p.147.

¹² Willis, M. D. (2009). *The Archaeology of Hindu Ritual: Temples and the Establishment of the Gods*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.p.301.



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