



Sacred Crossroads: Buddhism's Enduring Impact on Tripura and the South Asian Subcontinent

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Abstract:

Buddhism has played a significant role in shaping the religion and culture of South Asia, leaving a rich legacy in areas like Philosophy art, and architecture. Although its influence is well- documented across the region, the Buddhist history of Tripura is less recognized, despite its importance. "Sacred Crossroads: Buddhism's enduring impact on Tripura and South Asian Subcontinent". Explores Buddhism early roots in Tripura, tracing back to the Vedic Period, and how it diminished with the rise of Brahmins, particularly during the rule of Manikya Dynasty. The Study employs historical analysis, archaeological discoveries and ethnographic research to delve into the interaction between Buddhist and Brahmanical tradition in Tripura. It examines the enduring traces of Buddhist Influence, such as ancient sites, relics and oral tradition that continue to shape the cultural memory of the region. By situating Tripura within the larger South Asian Buddhist narrative, this research aims to address historical gaps and emphasize the importance of restoring the forgotten Buddhist heritage in northeastern India.

Keywords: Buddhism, Tripura, South Asian Buddhism, Religious Evolution



Figure 1: Pilak Archaeological Site

1. Introduction

Buddhism, which originated in the subcontinent of India, spread all over the world, influencing the culture and lives of people around Asia. However, there are certain parts of the country whose significance and contribution are not been recognized and seen by the people of the same country, India. The attachment of a culture to the religion was more in Tripura, a state located in the north-eastern part of India, which spread Buddhism and helped in the development of the same. The study is on the association of Tripura with Buddhism, emphasizing the significance of the previous history to study the ancient culture of the people in this state, which will help in the development of history in a wider aspect. The study helps in evaluating the reasons for the development of Buddhism in the state, the problems that led to its decrease, and the attachments that are even rooted in the region from the past. The study is conducted with respect and by collecting the reports from the students and the local people of the region. The students would help in

collecting the information regarding the early history of the state, and the problems that are related to the region in due course of time. The attitude and the nature of the people in the state, which is directly associated with Buddhism, are being collected with the help of the local people of the area. The study is conducted systematically to understand the historical importance of the culture and religion of the people in the region. The data are being collected with the help of the local people, and the information and the data so collected are scientifically analyzed. The study aims to show that Tripura is not historically insignificant but rather that it was an important part of the development of Buddhism in the South Asia region. Thus, the people of Tripura mustn't forget their Buddhist heritage.

1.1.1 Background and Significance of Study

Tripura's location between the Indian heartland and Southeast Asia has historically made the state a crossroads of cultural and religious exchange. While scholars of South Asian religion have studied Buddhist centres like Nalanda and Sarnath at length, Tripura has figured only marginally in the mainstream discourse. Yet archaic records, inscriptions, and material remains suggest that the religion was once widely practised there. An investigation into the state's Buddhist heritage reveals the process of the spread, syncretization, and subsequent recession of Buddhist practices in South Asia. The investigation establishes that northeastern India has played a much more pivotal role in Indian history than the traditional core-periphery model allows for. In this way, the focus on Tripura contributes to a decolonization of the region's history.

1.2 Objectives of the Research

This study seeks to achieve multiple objectives:

- a) To analyze the interaction between Buddhist and Brahmanical traditions.
- b) To record the remaining effects of Buddhism on Tripura's culture, stories and structures today.
- c) To contrast the Buddhist past of Tripura with that of other South Asian areas.
- d) To find out about the origins and historical evolution of Buddhism in ancient Tripura.

By meeting these objectives, the study not only enlightens upon the historical value of Tripura but also helps in encouraging new attempts at the preservation of this heritage. It hopes to invoke interest in historians, archeologists and policymakers to reclaim and preserve the Buddhist legacy.

1.3 Methodology and Sources

The research is based on various methodological techniques. The historical analysis method involves analyzing ancient texts, inscriptions, and secondary data sources. The archaeological method involves using archaeological analysis, while the ethnographic method is used by interviewing local scholars and old people for information. Primary sources that will be used to analyze the primary data include Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) reports, inscriptions, and oral traditions. Secondary sources that will be used to analyze secondary data include works by other authors on Buddhism in South Asia and the history of Tripura. Comparative method will be used to compare the Buddhist trend in Tripura with that of other areas like Bengal and Burma. This will help in understanding the trend of Buddhism in the area.

1.4 Scope and Limitations

Though the study endeavors to be all-inclusive, it must also have constraints acknowledged. Tripura, the archeological evidence is mostly not available or is not accessible. As many of the artefacts found as the remnants of Buddhism are also linked to Hinduism, in recognizing them as the remnants of Buddhism, it's sometimes difficult. Political constraints, as well as the negligence of universities towards northeastern India, are other major constraints. Even with these limitations, the study tries to stick to the historical truth. While studying Buddhism in northeast India, I will concentrate on the history of ancient and early medieval times. Also, I will analyze the existence of Buddhism in the present context. Though the outcomes can't be generalized, the investigation of Buddhism in northeast India would tell us the truth.

2. Buddhism in Ancient Tripura – A Historical Overview

The ancient history of Tripura is considered to be associated with the spread of Buddhism, although this feature is not well recognized in the literature from this domain. The geographical location of Tripura is such that it lies on the link connecting India with South East Asia. The infiltration of Buddhism in the region since the era of the Vedas is a well-known fact. For some time also had the ascendancy there Buddhism in Tripura. The chapter notes the place and time where Buddhism was the dominant religion, had the upsurge of monks, and was the center of religious discussions. Quickly after the decline of Buddhism, Brahmanism emerged as an alternative religion that supplanted Buddhism in Tripura. However, some of the kings of the Manikya Dynasty often "borrowed much of the tradition of Buddhism for absorption into the Hindu religion" (p. 82). Also, the followers of the dynasty are sharing their gift. The writer outlines the characteristics of the movement of and interaction with the religion from Buddhism here. We can confirm the existence of Buddhist stupas and sculptures from the region in the author's account. The information on these structures is supported by the report unearthed by an archaeologist. However, from the meager remains of the prehistoric age, it is a daunting task to recognize the features of the propagation of Buddhism in the region. Aside, it is worth noting that authors believe that the material on Buddhism in Tripura "is very scanty" (p. 86). This part is basically about the flourishing period of Buddhism in Tripura. In this context, the writer states that Buddhism ceased to be a popular religion in the region mainly because of its political downfall; however, Buddhism still managed to make a full impression in the heart of the region.

2.1 Early Buddhist Influences during the Vedic Period

Buddhism originated in the region of Tripura during the final years of Vedic civilization that allowed a free exchange of religious ideas and beliefs and gave birth to the many parallel movements such as Buddhism. These early missionaries probably made their way by the river ways and mountain passes of North East India, which is why the local tribes of Tripura—who were animists—were influenced by the Buddhist teachings on compassion, tolerance and mindfulness. The earliest Buddhist settlement seems to be far back in Indian antiquity, beyond the reach of recorded history. The trail that this phase of the early Buddhism in Tripura has left in the available historical references, consisting of mentions in the chronicles and accounts of Buddhism and other religions and philosophies, is a pointer to the charm and depth of the Buddhism as espoused in this area.

2.2 Archaeological Evidence of Buddhism in Tripura

Tripura, which is an Indian state, has been discovered as having a long history of Buddhism through some interesting archaeological discoveries such as stupas, chaityas, and lots of sculptural fragments which are found in Pilak, Jolaibari, and Boxanagr. The items that have been dug up in the last two centuries of the first millennium (from the 8th to 12th centuries CE) in these places give full evidence of various types of Buddhist architectural work and odd artistic works currently at the site. The sculptures of Avalokiteshvara, Tara, and the Buddha himself point to the presence of the Mahayana and Vajrayana schools of Buddhism. Many of the stupas and chaityas were identical to the ones found in Bengal and South East Asia, suggesting that the craftsmen may have been the same. This region was also characterised by the presence of both Hindu and Buddhist motifs on the same sculptures, suggesting that the two religions coexisted. However, the fall of Tripura led to the decline of Buddhism here.

2.3 Role of Tripura in South Asian Buddhist Networks

Tripura played an essential role as a link between the Indian subcontinent and the region of Southeast Asia. This was used as a region for trading and the movement of people which happened to be monks, traders, and pilgrims. The monks were able to spread their religious teachings across the borders of these regions. It is recognized that the Buddhist monasteries in Tripura played a major role in disseminating the teachings of Buddhism and maintaining contacts with the main centers of Buddhist learning in the main land of India such as Nalanda and Vikramashila. These Buddhist missionaries in this region played a pivotal role in spreading the Mahayana and Vajrayana traditions which in turn spread to the regions of Myanmar and Arakan. These missionary activities have made the Buddhist art to spread to the regions of Tripura and which in turn is evaluated based on Indian Buddhist art which was spread during the 7th to the 12th centuries.

2.4 Decline of Buddhism and the Rise of Brahmanism

Buddhism declined in Tripura as it did in much of India during the early medieval period. The reason for the decline was that Hinduism was growing and taking over Buddhist institutions. In Tripura, this period coincided with the reign of the Manikya dynasty, which promoted Hinduism. The Manikya kings built Hindu temples in locations that were previously occupied by Buddhist places of worship. As a result of the takeover of Buddhism places of worship, the symbols associated with Buddhism were incorporated into Hinduism or considered irrelevant. Although the number of Buddhists decreased, some of the teachings found their way into the general population of the region.

2.5 Impact of the Manikya Dynasty on Religious Transformation

The rule of the Manikya Dynasty in the state of Tripura had a great role to play in reshaping the religious identity of the place. They were the patrons of Hindu religion, especially of Shaivism and Vaishnavism. Many of the temples in Tripura were constructed with their finance. This change in the religious policies in the region saw the marginalization of the Buddhists. However, many Buddhist customs such as the use of talismans were blended with Hindu practices. Because of this blend, while certain folk deities in the state still have their roots in Buddhism, the people in the rural areas give them Hindu names and worship them. The Manikya's policies, which caused this blend, led to the formation of a syncretic religious practice in the region.

3. Buddhist–Brahmanical Interactions in Tripura

Brahmanism and Buddhism were both around, often crossing paths and influencing each other's traditions, symbols, and practices. In Tripura, religion isn't really about replacing one with the other; it's more like a mixture of negotiations, reinterpretations, and cultural blending. Over time, the society shifted from being mostly Buddhist to welcoming more Brahmanical traditions, but this wasn't a quick change — it was a slow, ongoing process of interaction and hybridization. You might notice Buddhist motifs, stupas, and relics popping up in Brahmanical buildings, sometimes getting reinterpreted as Hindu temples or blending into broader Hindu rituals. This mix blurred the clear-cut lines between Buddhist and Brahmanical practices. In this chapter, we look at how these religious ideas blurred edges across rituals, architecture, symbols, and everyday practices. We also see how Buddhist ideas were woven into the developing Hindu scene, often helping keep Buddhist memories alive through shifting forms. Essentially, this chapter digs into the tangled, layered religious history of Tripura, exploring temples, sculptures, and local traditions to tell a story rich with cross-cultural exchanges and complex meanings.

3.1 Syncretism and Cultural Exchange

The interaction between Buddhism and Brahmanism in Tripura was one of extreme syncretism. Instead of confrontation, the two religions were more likely to fuse, interborrowing deities, rituals, and art motifs. Buddhist concepts of compassion and non-violence, for instance, were assimilated into

Brahmanical moral codes. Buddhist iconography such as the lotus and the Bodhi tree also found symbolic continuity in Hindu temples. Rural deities in village society blended Buddhist and Hindu characteristics, reflecting the common cultural space. This cultural exchange allowed Buddhism to make a lasting impression even while Brahmanism came to dominate.

3.2 Shifts in Rituals, Symbols, and Practices

When Brahmanism grew stronger in Tripura, the majority of Buddhist rituals and symbols were reinterpreted rather than being destroyed. Buddhist rituals such as feeding monks and the worship of relics were reinterpreted in Brahmanical contexts. Sacred places originally dedicated to Buddhist devotion were typically re-designated as Hindu pilgrimage centers. Rituals entailed chanting, meditation, and merit-making and were adapted to conform to Brahmanical theological frameworks. Symbols such as the wheel (Dharmachakra) and Bodhi tree were re-interpreted with new Hindu meanings while still holding meaning as cultural signs. Such adaptation guaranteed the persistence of Buddhist traces in forms, though adapted, in Tripura's religious firmament.

3.3. Contestations and Assimilations in Temple Architecture

Tripura's architecture demonstrates the interaction between Brahmanical and Buddhist traditions. Some of the temples exhibit a blend of Buddhist and Hindu architectural styles, indicating a time when various religions were interacting and coexisting. Some Buddhist stupas were converted into Hindu temples or influenced the construction of Brahmanical temples. You'll notice features like dome-shaped sanctuaries, lotus medallions, and guardian figures—these all have roots in earlier Buddhist design. Sometimes, inscriptions and carvings include both Buddhist symbols and Hindu gods, which shows a pretty sophisticated process of blending ideas. Looking at how these structures changed over time, it's clear that material culture played a big role in how religion evolved in Tripura, preserving Buddhist heritage even as new Hindu styles emerged.

3.4 Preservation of Buddhist Elements in Brahmanical Traditions

Even as Buddhism itself lost political power, much of its spiritual and cultural content still remained within Brahmanical practices in Tripura. Buddhist moral teachings, stories, and symbolism still shaped regional Hindu practice. Buddhist mythology was reinterpreted within Hindu mythologies and the Buddha himself was sometimes thought to be an avatar of Vishnu. Folk practice, rituals, and rural festivals still contained Buddhist elements like communal merit-making, worship of sacred trees, and oral tradition regarding moral virtues. So even as Brahmanism gained power, it did so by incorporating and maintaining elements of the Buddhist worldview so that Buddhism's presence remained within the changing religious identity of Tripura.

4. Traces of Buddhism in Contemporary Tripura

Even though Buddhism as an organized religion faded away in Tripura many centuries ago, its cultural and spiritual influence still lingers around us today. You can catch subtle but meaningful signs of its past in how folks celebrate, the buildings they've kept, and the stories passed down through generations. These remnants act like living proof of Tripura's Buddhist roots, showing up in both physical things like monuments and in more intangible ways, like traditions and stories. In this chapter, we take a look at how Buddhism still shapes the local culture, checking out old sites and monuments that hint at Buddhist origins, spotting Buddhist-inspired symbols in festivals and customs, and listening to stories that carry Buddhist teachings and values. Recently, there's been a bit of a revival—people are making efforts to rediscover and protect the region's Buddhist history. These initiatives aren't just about looking back; they're also about strengthening local identity and encouraging harmony among communities. By exploring these modern-day connections, it's obvious that Tripura's Buddhist legacy remains resilient and flexible, always adapting to new times.

4.1 Ancient Sites and Monuments: A Living Legacy

Ancient Buddhist sites like Pilak, Jolaibari, and Boxanagr really display Tripura's rich Buddhist history. Take Pilak, for instance — it's been a rich source of sculptures and ruins that give us a peek into a bright Buddhist presence from the 8th to 12th centuries CE. You'll find sculptures of Buddhist gods like Avalokiteshvara and Tara there, and some of these sculptures sit alongside Hindu images, showing how layered and intertwined the region's religious history is. Even though many of these structures are now partly absorbed into local Hindu traditions, their architecture and artwork still clearly point to their Buddhist roots. People are working hard to preserve these sites, but there's still a lot to do to protect this important heritage for future generations.

4.2 Oral Traditions and Folklore Reflecting Buddhist Influence

Tripura's oral traditions subtly carry reflects of Buddhism that still resonates today. You'll often hear folk stories, songs, and legends that emphasize values like compassion, non-violence, and wisdom—things that are pretty much the core of Buddhist teachings. In rural areas, elders love sharing stories about wise kings, monks, and miraculous happenings, which remind me of those Jataka tales—the stories of the Buddha's past lives. Even though many festivals and community rituals nowadays are rooted in Hindu practices, they still keep alive some Buddhist touches, like collective acts of merit, offerings meant to symbolize peace, and respect for sacred trees. These stories and traditions aren't just old tales — they're like living memories that help keep Buddhist ideals alive, even as religious environments change over time.

4.3 Continuity in Cultural Memory and Identity

Indeed though Buddhism as a formal religion has really declined in Tripura these days, its substance still lives on in people's hearts and day-to-day lives. In municipalities a townlets, you can still see casts of Buddhist values like kindness, compassion, and respect for nature — woven into original customs and traditions. Many of the elderly reminisce about the tales of wise rulers and good monks, teaching them lessons which are astonishingly close to Buddhist ideals. People routinely do modest acts of charity, express great reverence for rivers and trees, and uphold ideals of non-violence, especially in times of festivities and local celebrations. So many everyday traditions really show how deeply rooted they are in the culture of Tripura. They speak to a collective memory that can't be neatly labeled or put into just one category of religious or cultural tradition. In many ways, the temperament of Tripura reflects a quiet combination of different faiths. Even though Buddhism might not be the dominant religion anymore, its essence—marked by humble wisdom and a focus on compassion—still lives on. You can see it in local customs, traditions, and stories that have been passed down through generations. These stories are a tribute to the idea that even when names and forms change, the spirit of a tradition remains alive, changing and persisting in the veins of the people's lives.

4.4 Efforts to Revive and Preserve Buddhist Heritage

In recent years, more people have started paying attention to Tripura's rich Buddhist history. This has led to efforts to preserve and bring back old sites. Archaeologists are working more actively, trying to restore places like Pilak, which have been around for centuries and hold a lot of historical significance. Academic studies, museum exhibitions, and cultural festivals have also helped revive interest in Tripura's Buddhist past. The local people, along with cultural organizations and the government, are joining hands to document relics, promote tourism based on Buddhist sites, and incorporate Buddhist history into school curricula. These initiatives not only help to celebrate the diverse past of Tripura but also create pride and identity among its people, reconnecting them with an otherwise lost heritage.

5. Tripura within the Larger South Asian Buddhist Context

Tripura's rich Buddhist heritage can't be completely appreciated in insulation; it was always part of a larger, bright network that connected South Asia with Southeast Asia. Located at a crossroads of societies and terrain, Tripura played an active part in a energetic exchange of ideas, trade, passage, and scholarly hobbies linking India to distant regions. Though Tripura may not be associated with big Buddhist centres like Nalanda or Bodhi Gaya, does not mean that it does not matter in the history of Buddhist dissemination and Buddhist art. In this chapter, we assess Tripura's position within an overarching South Asian Buddhist geography and evaluate it relative to regions with Buddhist infrastructure like Bengal, Myanmar, and Arakan (Rakhine). The analysis will focus on both the practice of critique and the critique of practice performed by the inflow of art, religious traditions, and ideas from Southeast Asia that originate in Tripura. Participation in trade routes was not merely about the exchange of material items — Tripura made impressions of doctrines and sacred art forms across regions. Though its monastic communities were lower than those in Bihar or Kashmir, they contributed vastly to Mahayana and Vajrayana traditions that shaped indigenous religious life. Indeed after some formal institutions declined, Tripura's literal connections to the broader Buddhist world continued through its art, legends, and artistic practices. Feting Tripura's part within this larger environment offers a richer, more connected view of South Asian Buddhist history, emphasizing its inclusivity and indigenous links.

5.1 Comparison with Neighboring Buddhist Centers

Tripura's Buddhist past might seem less evident than in larger places like Bengal and Myanmar, but it is just as important. Bengal, with its famous universities like Nalanda and Vikramashila, was a major center of Buddhist learning. Myanmar became an important place for Theravada Buddhism. Tripura might have been small, but it had close cultural ties with both locations. Buddhist art in Tripura has Bengali influences, especially in the way it depicted Bodhisattvas and Vajrayana gods. Additionally, being close to Myanmar meant cultural exchanges were shared which had an influence on the local practice. Tripura therefore remained a quiet connector in maintaining Buddhist practice but altering its own way uniquely.

5.2 Tripura's Role in Buddhist Trade and Pilgrimage Routes

If you glance at a map, Tripura kind of lounges right in that sweet spot between India and Southeast Asia. Back in the day, it was basically the expressway for traders and wandering monks. Silk, ivory, spices—the fancy stuff—all moved along those ancient routes. But honestly, it wasn't just about trade and treasure. Travelers also carried scrolls, sacred relics, art styles, and probably more than a few good stories. Buddhist pilgrims, for example, would journey between India and what we now call Myanmar, often stopping off in Tripura's monasteries—like ancient bed-and-breakfasts, just with more chanting and a lot less avocado toast. And that steady stream of travelers? It wasn't just good for business. It kept the spiritual energy alive and bouncing across regions. Tripura soaked in all those diverse rituals, languages, and worldviews, becoming a kind of cultural crossroads. Even now, if you follow the traces of those old routes, it feels like the past is still murmuring through the hills and valleys—Tripura was, in many ways, the original group chat of the Buddhist world, keeping everyone connected in mind, spirit, and tradition.

6. Conclusion

Tripura may be the last place that comes to mind when thinking of Buddhism in South Asia but this is why this study is important. North East India, and Tripura specifically, represents a unique but very strong Buddhist legacy—one that, for the most part, has been omitted from the larger, grand narratives around Buddhism, instead surrounding ourselves with Buddhist centers like that of Nalanda and Sarnath. But as we highlighted, Tripura was

not insulated; Tripura was interconnected, dynamic and integral to the cultural and spiritual movements of the time. We went from early influences in the Vedic period, to descriptions of thriving Mahayana and Vajrayana practices as indicated by archaeological finds in places like Pilak; Tripura carried the mantle of Buddhist thought and traditions for hundreds of years. Even after the decline in formal institutions related to Buddhism and the advent of Brahmanism—primarily framed by the Manikya dynasty—Buddhist values, symbols, and stories were prominent in the lives of daily peoples, oral traditions, and the art of temples. More than a part of history, Tripura's Buddhist heritage is a living remembrance. It teaches us something about how ideas cross mountains and borders, how cultures mix rather than break, and how spiritual teachings change and persist. The subtle presence of Buddhism in Tripura today—in the stories of elders, the compassion of custom, and the sacred footprints of forgotten monks—speaks to that persistence. There is still so much left to uncover. In excavating and honoring Tripura's Buddhist past, we are not just uncovering past ruins or decayed sculptures. We are connecting with a fundamental part of humanity's story that carries wisdom and kindness and deeper understandings of impermanence and peace. In doing so, we also affirm that wherever it exists in the margins, the sacred never really disappears, it just waits, patiently to be re-membered.

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