
The Pala Empire: An Imperial Dynasty (A Brief History and Analysis of Empire)

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Introduction to ‘The Palas’

The Palas were an imperial power in the Indian Subcontinent, which ruled around 8th century to 12th century AD, during the Post Classical Age. The Pala Empire initially originated in the present state of Bengal and consequently ruled over till Gandhara in the north, Kabul Valley and Sindh in the North West, Parts of Maharashtra and Vidarbha region. The Pala Empire was founded by Gopala in around 750 CE. The reign of Palas is said to be bought durable peace and stability to the region which was constantly under warring factions. It was also known as Palas because the name of all the rulers of this dynasty ended with *Pala*. The rulers of Pala Empire patronized Buddhism as the religion and was a major Buddhist imperial power. The rule of Palas started declining after the reign of Ramapala and was replaced by the Sena dynasty in the 12th century AD.

Sources- We come to know about the history of Palas through Khalimpur Copper Plate Inscription by Dharmapala, Baadal Pillar Inscription by Naryanpala, Nalanda Copper Plate and other inscriptions in Nalanda and Munger Copper Plate Inscription by Devapala and various other inscriptions at Bodh Gaya and Bhagalpur etc (Bagchi, 1993). We also find out about Palas in various Buddhist literature texts and other texts like Ramcharita.

Background and Political History of the Empire

Historical evidences suggests that, after the death of Sansanka, there was anarchy and confusion in the land of Bengal. The political situation in Bengal in the period after the death of the ruler Sansanka, during the eighth century AD was described *matsya nyaya*¹, which denotes the state of anarchy in which might alone is right. But because of this confusion and state of anarchy, people realized the problems of weak central government and became a source of problem for everyone. However, this evil situation brought a remedy and political solution that was very unique and rare for that period. The chiefs of Bengal couldn't endure this state of anarchy and realized that for peace and stability, a strong ruler is needed. So, the chieftains of Bengal elected Gopala as the ruler of Bengal. This event has a unique place in the history of ancient Indian history and Bengal, where power was sacrificed without any conflicts between independent political chiefs and was recognized as the ruler. (Sen, 1999, p. 277) (Majumdar, 2003) (Sinha) This episode of election of Gopala is described in brief in the Khalimpur Copper Plate² Inscriptions as (Sengupta, 2011) –

¹ Denotes Law of Fishes

² Khalimpur Plate Inscription was issued by Dharmapala I, successor of Gopala I and was found in present state of West Bengal

“Matsyanyayam apakritum prakritibhir Lakshmiya karam grahitah Sri Gopala iti kshitisa-sirsam chudamani-tatsubha” (Sengupta, 2011)

This means “To put an end to the state of affairs similar to what happens among fishes, the *prakriti* made the glorious Gopala, the crest jewel of the heads of kings, take the hand of Lakshmi, the goddess of fortune.” (Sengupta, 2011, p. 40) Gopala became the founder and first king of the Pala Empire in 750 CE.³

There are no epigraphic evidences issued by Gopala (Bagchi, 1993). But with other sources and especially the Khalimpur Inscription, we come to know that Gopala was the son of Vapyata , a powerful military chief or chieftain and the grandson of Dayitavishnu (Bagchi, 1993) (Sen, 1999). The sources and information of ancestry and descendance is very scarce. According to sources, like the Kamuli Copper Plate inscription⁴, the Palas called themselves as Kshatriyas or descendants of Solar dynasty. (Bagchi, 1993). But according to Ain-i-Akbari,⁵ the Palas were Kayasthas and according to Manjusree-Mulakalpa, Gopala I is described as from shudra caste (sudra). Apart from these literary sources, there is no much evidence which describes their descendance or ancestry (Bagchi, 1993). Another reason which explains lack of records of their caste and descendance is that the Palas were devout Buddhist and were not supposed to mention their caste or allude to Brahmanical institutions of caste. However, in their reign of four centuries , the Palas performed functions of Brahmanical system and also entered into matrimonial alliances with the Rashtrakutas and Kalachuris. (Bagchi, 1993) (Sengupta, 2011)

Gopala ascended the throne in around 750 CE . During his reign , he consolidated the empire by bringing whole of Bengal including Gaur , Varendra and Banga and Southern part of Bengal⁶ under his control (Bagchi, 1993) (Sengupta, 2011). He also extended his rule over parts of Magadha. With the consolidation campaign of his empire by bringing Gaur, Varendra , Banga and parts of Magadha under single authority , he also brought peace and stability in the region after the century of anarchy in the region (Sengupta, 2011) (Bagchi, 1993). According to RC Majumdar , Gopala ruled till 770 AD, leaving a strong consolidated empire when he died (Sengupta, 2011). Dharmapala , the son of Gopala I succeeded him. (Sengupta, 2011)

After Gopala , Dharmapala ascended the throne in around 770 AD. He is regarded as one of the greatest kings of the dynasty who took it to levels of greatness and takes an honorable place in the history of great kings (Sengupta, 2011). Early after his coronation as the king of empire , he was involved in a struggle with other two powers in the subcontinent – Pratiharas

³ Scholars still debate on the accession year of Gopala I . Approximate years . This is due to the lack of historical evidences

⁴ Kamuli Copper Plate Inscription issued by King Vaidyadeva , who was the king of Kamarupa

⁵ Ain- I – Akbari was written by Abul Fazl, who was of the Navratnas of Akbar’s court

⁶ Mentioned under Monghyr Plate inscription that Gopala conquered “the whole country ‘which implies South or lower Bengal. Another expression which hints at consolidation of empire by him is releasing of the war elephants which means ending the military campaign. Monghyr Plate Inscription was issued by third Pala Emperor Devapala and Monghyr is present city Munger in Bihar.

and Rashtrakutas . This struggle is known as Tripartite Struggle (Sinha) . But he suffered defeats in the political struggle from Pratiharas and Rashtrakuta . Firstly he was defeated by Vatsaraja , a Pratihara ruler.

Then in another battle he was defeated by Rashtrakuta king Dhruva , who left for Deccan region after little sometime⁷ (Sen, 1999). But , despite these setbacks , Dharmapala went into conquer large territories . Bengal and Bihar was under his direct control . He defeated the Ayudha king , Indrayudha and installed Chakrayudha on the throne and made the important political state of Kannauj as a dependency state or vassal state . The rulers of Bhoja⁸ , Matsya⁹ , Madra¹⁰ , Yadu¹¹ , Avanti¹² , Gandhara¹³ and Kira¹⁴ accepted the suzerainty of the Palas during his reign (Bagchi, 1993) . Even the states of Punjab , Rajputana and Western Hill States , Malwa , Berar acknowledged Dharmapala as his overlord and became a vassal state of Pala Empire¹⁵ . Nepal was also a vassal state , according to the tradition mentioned in Svayambhu Purana (Singh, 2008) .

But this triumphant reign of Dharmapala faced another hurdle and challenge again by his Pratihara nemesis Nagabhatta II¹⁶ (Sengupta, 2011) . He conquered Sindhu , Kalinga , Andhra , Vidarbha He drove away the protégé ruler Chakrayudha of Kannauj and defeated Dharmapala in the battle for the supremacy in Kannauj . But Dharmapala was rescued from the perilous situation with the help of intervention by Govinda III of Rashtrakutas¹⁷. According to the Rashtrakutas records , both Dharmapala and Chakrayudha submitted to Govinda III voluntarily and willingly . However, this submission meant nothing as Govinda III again retreated towards Deccan region , leaving Dharmapala as the master of North India once again . But despite all setbacks , the empire under Dharmapala was fairly extended and large geographically . He ruled the empire for 32 years and adopted the imperial title of *Parmeshwara Parambhattaraka Maharajadhiraja* to commemorate his achievements and signify his power as an emperor in Indian Subcontinent (Sen, 1999) . He was succeeded by his son Devapala.

Devapala, the successful heir of Dharmapala , ascended the throne in around 810 AD (approx.) by uprooting his brother Tribhuvanpala from the throne . Devapala like his father , was skilled military leader and administrator (Bagchi, 1993) . In the Monghyr Copper Plate ,

⁷ Since he was already far from his capital and kingdom, Dhruva of Rashtrakuta returned towards Deccan Region.

⁸ Present day Vidarbha

⁹ Present day Jaipur

¹⁰ Present day Sialkot

¹¹ Present day Gujarat and Mathura

¹² Present day West Malwa

¹³ Present day Peshawar or Taxila

¹⁴ Present day Kangra Valley

¹⁵ These states were not annexed by Dharmapala but accepted his suzerainty . The Munger plate inscription credits him for conquest till Kedarnath in northern extent

¹⁶ Successor of Pratihara ruler Vasaraja from whom Dharmapala was defeated early in his reign

¹⁷ Dharmapala married a Rashtrakuta princess Rannadevi whose identity details are not known to us

it is mentioned that he advanced as far as the Vindhayas and the Kamboja (Bagchi, 1993) . We also come to know through

Badal Pillar Inscription of Narayanapala¹⁸ , that Palas received tributes from North parts of the subcontinent , extending from Himalayas to Vindhayas in north to south extent and from western to eastern seas in the western – eastern extent as Devapala became overlord of these areas and parts of the subcontinent with the help of his minister Darbhapani (Sengupta, 2011) (Bagchi, 1993). In the same inscription , it is also mentioned that Devapala “ eradicated the race of the ‘Utkalas’ , humbled the pride of the Hunas , and shattered the conceit of the Dravida and the Gurjara kings “ (Bagchi, 1993). This means that he defeated Dravidas, Gurjaras , Hunas , conquered Utkala and Kamrupa with the help of his minister Darbhapani and his cousin Jayapala (Sen, 1999) . It was only during the reign of Devapala , the Pala empire was at its pinnacle .

The Fall and Decline of Palas

After the death of Devapala , the Pala empire started crumbling and started to lose its glory and power . Mahendrapala succeeded him followed by Surapala (Bagchi, 1993). Surapala was succeeded by Vigrahapala who was Devapala’s nephew¹⁹. However, some scholars argue that Vigrahapala was Devapala’s son (Sen, 1999, p. 280). Regardless , only after a very short reign of three – four years , he abdicated the throne and took a life of hermit or ascetic . (Sen, 1999) During the reign of later Palas , the Pala empire started disintegrating. Around the time of 860 AD , the Pala ruler Narayanapala was defeated by Rashtrakuta king . With this weakness of the Pala Empire , The Bhoja of Pratiharas and Mahendrapala started to extend their powers in eastern parts of the subcontinent . Not only losing Magadha , Narayanapala also lost north Bengal , which was the heartland and important area of the Palas. However , the Palas under Narayanapala recovered the area of North Bengal and South Bihar due to the fact that Pratiharas were weakened by the invasions of Rashtrakutas . This factor has once again saved the Pala Empire (Sen, 1999)

The rule of later Palas proved disastrous for the Empire . During the rule of Gopala II and Vigrahapala II , the Palas lost the whole of Bengal and ruled only in Bihar . And a series of invasions by the Chandellas and Kalachuris further debilitated the Pala Empire. Due to this there was a rise of independent kingdoms like Gauda , Radha , Anga and Vanga , which once were important constituent areas of the Palas (Sen, 1999) . Among the new kingdoms in Bengal , Gauda was ruled by a Kamboja²⁰ family whose origins are not known to us . As Pala empire declined , kings of these independent kingdoms took advantage of the weakness and

¹⁸ Seventh Emperor of Pala Dynasty

¹⁹ Due to lack of sources, there is a lot of confusion among the scholars on who succeeded Devapala. Some scholars believed Surapala was the successor or Vigrahapala was the successor and the one more theory was that Surapala and Vigrahapala were one which was moderately supported till Mirzapur Inscription

²⁰ Not much is known about them. But the most agreed view is that some high-ranking member of Pala court saw the weakness and set up an independent kingdom.

started assuming the imperial titles such as Kantideva of Harikela²¹, who assumed the title of Maharajdhiraja (Sen, 1999).

But around 10th century AD, the Pala Empire saw a restoration in its glory under the sovereignty of Mahipala I who took over the throne in around 988 A.D. It was the skilled administration and military ingenuity of Mahipala that saved the Pala Empire. Mahipala was able to reannex the northern and eastern part of Bengal and northern and eastern part of Bihar. The empire under his rule might have also included Benaras due to the fact that various structures have been found in Sarnath undertaken by his brothers. Thus, it was in the reign of Mahipala that Palas were able to reestablish their authority over the subcontinent once again. (Sengupta, 2011) (Sen, 1999)

However once again, after the death of Mahipala, the Pala empire once again started declining. Weak successors and series of invasion from the West and South and rise of new powers such as Varmans weakened the power and might of the Palas. They not only lost Bengal, but also their power in Magadha region became precarious. Thus, Pala Empire once again, was seeing its dissolution. (Sen, 1999)

In the 11th century, Vignrahapala III was succeeded by Mahipala II. According to *Ramcharita*²², Mahipala II imprisoned his brothers and faced a rebellion of vassal states led by Divya, a Kaivarta²³ and was defeated and killed in the rebellion. In the midst of this political chaos, both Surapala II and Ramapala exiled in Magadha. Surapala II died after a short period of time and was succeeded by Ramapala (Sen, 1999)

It was the Pala king Ramapala who revived the Pala empire once again. Soon after ascending the throne, he defeated Bhima in a pitched battle and also occupied Varendra. Ramapala also shifted his capital to Ramawati and established an efficient administration and reduced taxation, promoted cultivation and established peace and order in the kingdom (Sengupta, 2011). Ramapala reestablished his authority in Bengal and also brought Assam and Orissa under his influence. Ramapala also secured friendly relations with Chola King²⁴ and successfully defended his dominion from the aggressive invasions of Gangas, Chalukyas and Gahadavalas (Sen, 1999). Ramapala was the last powerful ruler who restored the glory of Palas. He died in around 1120 AD (Sen, 1999) (Sengupta, 2011)

After his death, the restored greatness of Palas, once again started declining due to weak successors, internal dissention and rebellions within the empire among the kings and ministers of the empire and rise of independent powers in the Subcontinent. After four centuries of imperial rule, the Palas finally declined with and passed into obscurity with time. (Sen, 1999)

²¹ Harikela means Eastern Bengal and their capital was Vardamanpura.

²² By Sadhyakara Nandi

²³ Kaivarta by caste, Divya is credited for defeating Mahipala II and establishing Kaivarta dynasty

²⁴ Chola King Kulottunga

Social and Cultural Impacts of Palas

In their four centuries long imperial rule, the Palas left a great and lasting social and cultural legacy in the history of the Subcontinent. During the period of Palas , architecture witnessed a great progress . But with the ravages of time, unfortunately only few remains of Pala architecture have been found. The Buddhist Vihara at Somapura which was constructed by Dharmapala ,is a great example of Pala architecture . It influenced architecture of Greater India, especially in Burma and Java²⁵. (Sen, 1999)

The Pala rulers were ardent Buddhists and during the reign of Pala rulers , Buddhism found safe refuge in the eastern part of India. Mahayana Buddhism became a dominant force and had immense influence over the subcontinent and in Tibet in north and Malay Archipelago in the southern extent . The first ruler , Gopala is said to have been built the monastery of Odantapuri²⁶ , Santarakshita , a great philosopher and brilliant dialectician , worked in the court of Gopala I. (Sen, 1999)

The second ruler Dharmapala made Haribhadra , his spiritual preceptor. He also founded the Vikramsila Monastery in Magadha (Sen, 1999). This monastery witnessed translations of many Sanskrit texts into Tibetan. He is also credited for founding Vikarmasila University²⁷ which almost rivalled with Nalanda University in coming years (Bagchi, 1993). Dharmapala also founded fifty religious' institution , according to Taranatha . His successor , Devapala was an ardent Buddhist . The temple of Sri Traikutaka , which later on came to be known as the new Somapuri – vihara of which the ruins have been found at Paharpur was restored by Devapala (Sen, 1999) . According to Taranatha , a lot of Buddhist monks were after Devapala (Sen, 1999) . According to an inscription in Nalanda University, King Balaputradeva of Silendra dynasty ruling in present day Indonesia and Malaysia , sent an ambassador to the court of Devapala with a request of granting five villages for the maintenance of a monastery built by him at Nalanda (Bagchi, 1993) (Sengupta, 2011) . Emperor Devapala appointed Veeradeva , an established and learned Brahman and Buddhist as the head of the Nalanda University , and was a patron and preserver of the famous Nalanda University , according to the Ghosravan Inscription (Sengupta, 2011) . In the reign of Palas , a vast literature vaguely known as Buddhist Tantric works was produced which teaches about esoteric doctrines , rites etc. . This culture prevailed during the reign period of Pala rulers. Even the monasteries such as Nalanda , Vikrmashila , Somapuri etc , which were under guardianship of Pala Emperors , were associated with the composition and translation of these Tantric literature . Thus , we can say that Buddhist Pala rulers encouraged these Buddhist and associated tantric literature . (Sen, 1999)

The Pala Empire also saw development in sculpture also . Only few have been found but we can derive that from these sculptures we get an idea of daily life of the people in the Empire . The Pala also witnesses the distinct event in the evolution of Bengali language . the people

²⁵ The square temples at Pagan in Burma represent brilliant points of similarity with the temple in Paharpur.

²⁶ Modern day Bihar Sharif

²⁷ Famous Educational Institution of Vikaramsila monastery with six famous dvara-panditas

developed a ‘ Proto Bengali ‘ under the rule of Dharmapala . This language was spoken by masses in the region and Charyyapadas , a collection of verses composed by Buddhist poets were created in this language. (Sen, 1999)

Political Genealogy of the Empire²⁸

- Gopala I (750 – 770 CE)
- Dharmapala (770-810 CE)
- Devapala (810 – 850 CE)
- Mahendrapala²⁹
- Surapala I
- Vighrahapala I
- Narayanapala I
- Rajyapala I
- Gopala II
- Vighrahapala II
- Mahipala I (988 CE- 1036 CE)
- Nayapala
- Vighrahapala III
- Mahipala II
- Surapala II
- Ramapala II(1077-1130 CE)
- Kumarapala
- Gopala III
- Madanapala
- Govindapala
- Palapala

Analysis

The Pala Empire was an imperial power that was founded by Gopala I in 8th century A.D . It was a glorious Buddhist imperial power that left a great legacy on the political and cultural history of Bengal and at large , the Indian Subcontinent . We come to know about the Pala dynasty and its art and architecture through various sources such as Khalimpur Copper Inscription , Munger Copper Plates, Badal Pillar Inscription , inscriptions found in Nalanda and various other sources. During the time of Palas , Buddhism was dominant , and we see a creation and translation of a lot of Buddhist literature, which also tells about the Palas and how they encouraged literature .

But though many sources have been found in regards to Palas, but still a lot of sources couldn't survive the ravages of time or couldn't be found possibly. Due to this reason , a lot of information and facts about the Pala dynasty are still unknown or obscure in present times

²⁸ Dates not mentioned due to various dates from various scholars

²⁹ Lack of sources, there is a confusion among various historians over successor

with given technology and other means . Despite that , it is necessary to know about Palas because they played a huge role in the history of Indian subcontinent both politically and socio- culturally aspects.

The situation in Bengal was chaotic and of instability in 8th century . The state of the region is even compared to ‘Law of Fishes‘ which means total breakdown of peace or prevalence of anarchy in the region and the society. Before the ascension of Palas , the region was seeing constant wars and rule of different kinds of regional kingdoms which was causing a lot of confusion in the society and due to this this state, the region, especially the chieftains, was suffering from economic and social problems such as famines , poverty , losses in work and production , civil wars etc. at a high extent . So, to resolve this , the chiefs of Bengal decided to elect Gopala , who founded the Pala dynasty, to rule the region . This was a distinctive solution though it is known that it was practiced in the tribal kingdoms and secondly it was not per se direct election of the ruler by the people , but still it was a unique political solution for the region to ensure strong central power and sovereign . This might have been done looking at the benefits the strong central state accrued by ensuring peace and security in the region. Gopala I , though scholars still debate the exact date of his ascension to throne , but generally it is agreed in and around 750 CE. Immediately after his reign , Gopala started his military and political consolidation and brought kingdoms Gaur , Varendra and parts of Magadha under his direct rule . In his short reign , he bought peace in the region while consolidating his empire . Gopala has not left epigraphical evidences , due to the fact constant wars for consolidation and ensuring peace in a very short reign .

Dharmapala , the second ruler , succeeded his father Gopala I. He is considered one of the greatest Pala rulers . In his rule , he constantly faced the threat from Gurjara-Pratiharas , Rashtrakutas . However, with his political and military skills and little fate , he was able to conquer Kannauj and other large territories and was able to get other states such as Avanti, Gandhara etc. to accept his sovereignty over them through astute diplomacy and power . He assumed the major imperial title of Parmeshwara Parambhattaraka Maharajadhiraja , which signifies his might and power as an Emperor in the Subcontinent. Apart from political conquest , he was an ardent believer of Buddhism and constructed Vikramsila Monastery and University which was the contemporary of Nalanda University. Though Buddhist, he was not against any other religion . His rule is considered to be great age for Buddhism .

Devapala succeeded Dharmapala I . Considered to be the greatest ruler of Pala dynasty , he increased the size of empire to include all regions from Himalayas in North to Vindhyas in South . It was Devapala, who is credited to defeated the powerful kingdoms and kings of Hunas , Dravidas, Gurjaras etc. Devapala not only worked on the empire politically and militarily but he also credited for increasing the glory of Nalanda University as its guardian and also an ardent Buddhist , gave five villages to the King Ballaputradeva for the monastery in Nalanda. Devapala with his might power and love and devotion to Buddhism , took the Palas to new glory and heights .

But unfortunately, this glory didn't last for very long . The later Palas who succeeded Devapala were weak rulers . Though due to lack of sources , there is confusion among the scholars about the successor of Devapala , but it can also be possible that there might have been war of succession or split of empire among the sons of Devapala due to which along with lack of sources there is confusion on successor of Devapala. Because of these internal wars and dissension , weak successor and their policies and rise of new powers and the constant threat from Pratiharas led to loss of major areas. Another reason for the weakening of hold of Palas can be the foreign invasions from central India , though there is a little evidence of effect of invasions on Palas founded till now. Though two Pala rulers Mahipala and Ramapala almost restored Pala prestige during their reign but despite that also , Palas finally declined by 12th century , ending the rule of powerful yet rocky and erratic empire in its years after Devapala I.

Conclusion

So as to conclude, we can say that the Pala Empire though being powerful in its initial years but became inconstant in its last years , still plays a big role in Ancient Indian History . It is credited to be the one of the major Buddhist Imperial power due to which Buddhism became one of the biggest religion in the north and eastern region and ensured peace and stability in the region after the state of anarchy in 7-8th century AD. The Palas through their astute diplomacy , politics and propagation of Buddhism , were able to influence not only the regional history but also the Indian Subcontinent's history

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