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### Education System And Intellectual Pursuits During The Pāla Period As Reflected In The Inscriptions Of Ancient Bengal

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**Abstract+:**

Among archaeological materials, inscriptions are particularly important. From these inscriptions, we gain insights into the education system and academic pursuits of the respective periods. The inscriptions found in ancient Bengal provide valuable information about the education system and scholarship in ancient India. Additionally, texts like Patañjali's *Mahābhāṣya*, the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the *Mahābhārata*, the *Dharmasūtras*, and various poetic works offer relevant data. Education was primarily imparted through oral tradition by the teacher or preceptor (guru or ācārya). The writings of travelers such as Faxian, Xuanzang, and Yijing also provide significant information about the education system. Apart from inscriptions, literary works also depict the composition of texts and the culture of scholarship in ancient Bengal.

Education played an important role in the social life of ancient Bengal. In the sphere of Brahmanical religious education, Brahmins were the principal teachers and custodians of all branches of knowledge. However, unlike the modern era, they did not teach professionally for remuneration. This fact is evident from Bengal's inscriptions. Therefore, kings often donated land to Brahmins to promote education and ensure they did not have to worry about their livelihood. Various customs and practices are discussed in these inscriptions. During the reign of the Pāla emperors, the flourishing of different branches of knowledge is prominently evident. Under Pāla rule, Buddhist monasteries became important centers of higher education. Inscriptions reveal Bengal's fame in the study of Smṛti and religious texts. There was also notable development in medical science, particularly Ayurveda, in eastern India. Thus, based mainly on inscriptions discovered in Bengal, a picture of the education system during the Pāla period is presented here.

**Keywords:** Vedic Age, Inscriptions, Scholarship, Education System, *Mahābhāṣya*, *Rāmāyaṇa*, *Mahābhārata*, *Dharmasūtras*.

A large amount of data regarding the education system and scholarship in ancient Bengal can be gathered from various inscriptions and literary works. The present paper discusses the education system during the reign of the Pāla kings as reflected in such inscriptions, i.e. inscriptions of ancient Bengal.

In the realm of poetry, the Gaurī and Vaidarbhī styles (Gaurī-rīti and Vaidarbhī-rīti) were particularly prominent. In ancient Bengal as well, importance was given to these two styles in poetry composition. The Gaurī and Vaidarbhī styles were identified by their regional associations. In *Harṣacarita*, Bāṇabhaṭṭa states that people followed different poetic styles, but the inhabitants of Gauḍa preferred grandiose language with heavily compounded words:

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“श्लेषप्रायमुदीच्येषु प्रतीच्येष्वर्थमात्रकम् ।

उऽप्रेक्षादाक्षिणात्येषु गौडेष्वक्षरडम्बरः”॥<sup>1</sup>

Although the Gaurī style originated in the Gauḍa region of eastern India, it was not restricted to that region alone but spread beyond Bengal as well. The use of long compounds in various inscriptions serves as evidence. For example:

“आयाता नववारि-भाक-विनमन्मेघावली प्रावृडित्युन्मादोद्धत-  
चेतसः शिखिगणवाचालतामाययुः”।

“नीचैस्तेनापि यस्य प्रणति-भुज-वलावर्जन-क्लिष्ट-मूर्द्धनाचूडा-  
पुष्पोपहारैर्मिहिरकुलनृपेणाञ्जितं पाद-युग्मम्”।<sup>2</sup>

Poets such as Bhavabhūti, Bhaṭṭanārāyaṇa, Mūrāri, Sandhyākara Nandi, and Śrīharṣa followed the Gaurī style. Inscriptions like Bhāskara Varma’s *Nidhanpur copperplate*, Lokanātha’s *Tapera Tamrapaṭṭa*, and the records of the Pāla and Sena kings show extensive use of the Gaurī style, which was particularly suited for composing eulogies.

Education played a crucial role in the social life of ancient Bengal. Brahmins, who adhered to the Brahmanical religion, were the principal educators and custodians of all branches of knowledge, although they did not teach professionally or accept payment. This is proven by Bengal’s inscriptions. Hence, kings often granted land to Brahmins to promote and spread education so that they would not have to worry about their livelihood.

In the *Guṇaighar Copperplate* of Vainyagupta (188 Gupta Era or 507 CE), it is mentioned that a Mahāyāna Buddhist monk named Ācārya Śāntideva was a distinguished scholar. The *Faridpur Copperplate* issued during the third regnal year of Dharmāditya records the land grant to a Brahmin named Candrasvāmin, a Bhāradvāja gotra member, who was an expert in the Bājasaneyī branch of the Vedas and in the six Vedāṅgas. The same copperplate also indicates that local feudal rulers themselves studied various scriptures. In another instance from Dharmāditya’s *Faridpur copperplate*, a talented Brahmin named Somasvāmin is mentioned, who was proficient in the Kāṇva-Bājasaneyī and Lohitya branches. Similarly, the *Faridpur Copperplate* of Gopacandra mentions a Brahmin scholar named Bhaṭṭagomidāsvaṃī, who was associated with the Kāṇva school, Bājasaneyī recension, and Lohitya gotra. Another scholar, Vatsasvāmin of the Kaṇḍinya gotra, is known from the *Mallasarul Copperplate* issued during the third regnal year of Gopacandra by Vijayāsena.

From these post-Gupta copperplates mentioning Brahmins associated with different branches of the Vedas, it is evident that Vedic studies continued in parts of Bengal (now Bangladesh) and Rādhā region as well. During the Pāla period, there was a glorious flourishing of academic pursuits across various branches of knowledge. Many literary talents emerged during this time, enriching the treasury of Sanskrit literature through their original works. The presence of many scholars from this period attests to this flourishing, marking it as an important era in the intellectual history of mankind. The Pāla inscriptions particularly highlight the importance of education during this time. In Dharmapāla’s *Khālīmpur Copperplate*, his ancestor Dayitaviṣṇu is referred to as sarvavidyāvādāta (expert in all knowledge). It may be mentioned here that governing a country required mastery of all types of scriptures. Tibetan accounts provide insights about the Vikramaśīla Mahāvihāra,<sup>3</sup> which is believed to have been founded by Dharmapāla, who bore the title Vikramaśīla. Consequently, it became famous as Śrīmat Vikramaśīla Devavihāra. During his reign, the head of this monastery was known as Buddhajñānapāda. In the contemporary *Mahābodhi Inscription* or *Keśavaprasasti*, we find the puzzling phrase smātakampr jayastu? śreyase pratiṣṭāpitaḥ. The exact meaning is unclear, possibly due to a scribal error; however, if read as snātakānāṃ prajānāṃ ca, it would mean "for the graduates and the people" — where snātaka refers to one who, after completing Vedic education in the guru’s house, was permitted to enter household life. This indicates that although the Pāla kings were Buddhists, they granted land to Brahmin teachers and played a significant role in promoting Vedic studies in eastern India.

From Devapāla’s *Munger Copperplate*, we learn that both kings and priests were skilled in various fields of knowledge. The copperplate mentions that a Brahmin named Vihekarātīmishra, belonging to the Aupamanyava gotra, was proficient in the Āśvalāyana branch of the Vedas, grammar, and epistemology. Vihekarata Mishra was a scholar well-versed in the Āśvalāyana branch of the Vedas, grammar, and epistemology (pramāṇa-vidyā). His father, Barāharata, was a learned person, and his grandfather, Viśvarata, was particularly adept in conducting Vedic sacrifices and rituals. The copperplate inscription under discussion mentions "Padavākya-pramāṇa-vidyā," indicating that during this period, the study of grammar and epistemology (or Nyāya philosophy) was widespread.

During the Pāla rule, Buddhist monasteries evolved into centers of higher education. The Pāla kings were Buddhists and played an important role in the comprehensive development of Nālandā University. From Devapāla's *Nālandā Copperplate Inscription*, it is known that Balaputradeva, the king of Suvarṇadvīpa and Yavadvīpa (modern Sumatra and Java), was so attracted by Nālandā's glorious reputation that he constructed a Buddhist monastery there. This monastery served as a residence for many virtuous Buddhist monks. This proves that Nālandā University during that period was a renowned center for learning, with its fame not restricted to India alone but extending beyond Indian borders. The contemporary *Ghoṣarāya Inscription* or *Vīradeva Prasasti* from Devapāla's time also provides much valuable information. During Devapāla's reign, the education system followed the model of Buddhist teaching methods. However, during this time, a talented Brahmin named Indagupta had mastered all the Vedas and had gained expertise in various branches of science.

“वेदानधीत्य सकलान् कृतशास्त्रचिन्तः श्रीमत्कनिष्कमुपगम्य  
महाविहारम् ।  
आचार्यवर्ष्यमथ स प्रशम-प्रशस्यं सर्वज्ञशान्तिमनुगम्य  
तपश्चचार”॥<sup>4</sup>

This inscription particularly highlights educational activities. Vīradeva, a resident of present-day Jalalabad, after visiting the Kaniṣka Vihāra at Puruṣapura and meeting monks at Yaśovarmapura, was attracted to Nālandā. His immense scholarship earned him the admiration of Devapāla, and he was appointed as the head of Nālandā University. Professor P.L. Paul notes that it is not clear whether Vīradeva was appointed by Devapāla himself or elected by the Buddhist Saṅgha. In his words: "Viradeva, a native of modern Jalalabad, after visiting Kaniṣka Vihāra at Puruṣapura and meeting the monks of his own country at Yaśovarmapura, was attracted by Nālandā. His vast erudition won for him the admiration of Devapala and the exalted position of the head of the great University."<sup>5</sup>

The *Gayā Stone Pillar Inscription* from the time of Nayapāladeva (1038 CE–1055 CE) is also noteworthy for information regarding education. It mentions that understanding common people's conversations was especially difficult because their speech would blend with the loud chanting of Brahmins reciting the Vedas throughout the day. This suggests that the practice of continuous Vedic recitation was prevalent. The inscription further states that Śūdraka was compared to the divine

preceptor Bṛhaspati for his extraordinary mastery in various disciplines. From the inscription, we also learn that Śūdraka's son Viśvāditya was skilled in various fine arts and adorned with many virtues:

“एते सन्ति गुणाः पृथक् परमुदञ्चद्भिर्जिगीषा-रसैर्विश्वादित्यमजी-  
जनत् सुतमसावेभिः समस्तैः श्रितम्”<sup>6</sup>

Regarding the education system at Vikramaśīlā Vihāra during Nayapāla's reign: The central large hall had six doors, with three serving as entrances to three Mahāvīdyālayas (great colleges). Each college housed eight professors, and under each professor's supervision, about a hundred students pursued their studies. The entrance halls were adorned with portraits of Nāgārjuna and Atiśa Dīpaṅkara. Special emphasis was given to grammar, religious philosophy, and metaphysics, but above all, Tantra studies were predominant and highly recognized. Vikramaśīlā became famous for producing learned Buddhist Tantric scholars. It is particularly noteworthy that Buddhist scholars bore titles such as Ācārya, Mahācārya, Upādhyāya, Mahopādhyāya, Paṇḍita, Mahāpaṇḍita, and Bhikṣu. Thus, scholars like Jetāri of Varendra and Ratnavajra of Kashmir earned their prestigious certificates from royal patrons.<sup>7</sup>

During Atiśa Dīpaṅkara's time, there were 108 professors at Vikramaśīlā Vihāra. Admission was extremely rigorous. Each of the six gates had a gatekeeper, who was a renowned scholar acting as a guard. Students desiring to study there had to first pass an entrance examination administered by these gatekeepers. These gatekeepers were comparable in status to modern-day departmental heads. A board of eminent professors managed all administrative affairs of the university and issued various instructions to the faculty. This description undoubtedly gives us a clear picture of how the educational system was operated in ancient times.

The *Garuda Pillar Inscription* from the time of Nārāyaṇapāla (854 CE–908 CE) provides information about the erudition of Brahmin ministerial families under the Pāla dynasty. Brahmin Darbhapāni was well-versed in the four Vedas:

“सकृद्दर्शन-सम्पीतान् चतुर्विद्या-पयोनिधीन्।

जहासागस्त्य-सम्पत्तिमुद्भिरत् वाल एव यः”॥<sup>8</sup>

Darbhapāni's descendant Kedāramiśra was famous for his brilliant personality. Due to his overall mastery in scholarly pursuits, he became renowned as a supremely learned figure. The inscription also reveals that he mastered the four Vedas in childhood, like a vast ocean, and was particularly skilled in Vedic literature. Another

descendant, Gurabamiśra, served as a minister to Nārāyaṇapāla. He was highly proficient in astronomy (jyotiṣa), astrology, and Vedic literature. This proves that in ancient eastern India, not only Vedic knowledge and grammar but also subjects like astrology and astronomy were widely studied.

Gurabamiśra was considered a universal scholar, renowned for both his intellectual brilliance and wisdom: “The treasures of speech scholarship in the Vedas, supreme devotion to statecraft, relations with a family shining in splendour due to proficiency in Vedic precepts, love for speaking highly of the great, and profound knowledge of astrology.”<sup>9</sup>

The inscription further states that both the Goddess of Wealth and the Goddess of Learning jointly blessed him, abandoning their mutual rivalry to reside together in him. Brahmin Gurabamiśra was simultaneously a celebrated logician and a valiant warrior. It was difficult to defeat his logic in scholarly debates. He authored a treatise on the Śruti (Vedic scriptures).

Next, we mention Nārāyaṇapāla's *Bhāgalpur Copperplate Inscription*. It states that Nārāyaṇapāla himself was a learned person whose eloquence attracted scholars. Being proficient in many disciplines, he was able to perform all his royal duties flawlessly. The inscription also reveals that the propagator of this charter was an extremely learned individual, well-versed in the Vedas, Vedāṅgas, Brāhmaṇas, and the metaphysical secrets of Vedānta.

From the "Stone Slab Inscription" dating to the time of Gopāladeva (940 CE–960 CE), we learn that during the first regnal year of Gopāladeva, on the eighth day of the waxing moon in the month of Āśvina, the Goddess Sarasvatī manifested herself. Next, we refer to the Bhagalpur Copperplate Inscription of Narayanapala. It states that Narayanapala himself was a learned man, and scholars were drawn to him because of his eloquence, as he was well-versed in various branches of knowledge. As a result, he could perform all his duties without any error. The inscription further reveals that the promoter of this grant was also a highly learned individual, thoroughly acquainted with the esoteric principles of the Vedas, Vedāṅgas, Brāhmaṇas, and Vedānta philosophy.

From the Contemporary Stone Inscription of Gopaladeva (circa 940–960 CE), it is known that on the eighth day of the bright fortnight of the month of Ashvina, during the first year of his reign, the goddess Sarasvatī manifested herself. This suggests that during his reign, with the progressive advancement of learning and scholarship, the

worship of Sarasvatī became widely popular. It is noteworthy that a statue of Vāgīśvarī or Sarasvatī, covered in gold foil, was discovered—probably dating from the time of the second Gopaladeva. Sir Alexander Cunningham unearthed this statue from the ruins of Nālandā monastery in 1862.<sup>10</sup> However, the period during which Sarasvatī is worshipped today differs from the period indicated here.

From the *Bāngarh Copperplate Inscription* of Mahīpāla I (988–1038 CE), we learn that on the occasion of Chaitra Saṅkrānti, King Mahīpāla I donated land to a Brāhmaṇa. This Brāhmaṇa, Bhattaputra Kṛṣṇāditya, was the son of Bhattaputra Madhusūdana and the grandson of Bhattaputra Hṛṣīkeśa. Belonging to the Parāśara gotra, he had studied the Vājaseyanī branch of the Yajurveda and was an accomplished scholar in Mīmāṃsā, grammar, and other disciplines. This indicates that during that time, highly educated Brāhmaṇas would receive land grants and valuable gifts from the royal court. In the sixth regnal year of Mahīpāla, Kalyāṇamiśra copied a manuscript of the Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā.

“द - सत्राह्नचारिणे।वाज-शाखाध्यायिने।

मीमांसा-व्याकरण-तर्कविद्याविदे।हस्तिपद-ग्राम-विनिर्गताय  
चवटिग्राम-वास्तव्याय।भट्टपुत्र-रि(ह)षिकेश-पौत्राय।

भट्टपुत्र-मधुशू(सू)दनपुत्राय।भट्टपुत्र(कृष्णादि)त्य-

शर्मणे विशु(षु)व-संक्रान्तौ विधिञ्चत्”।<sup>11</sup>

From Madanapāla's *Manahali Copperplate Inscription*, it is known that the regular recitation of the Rāmāyaṇa, Mahābhārata, and Purāṇas was encouraged for future prosperity. For this reason, Madanapāla's mother donated land to a Brāhmaṇa named Śrībaṭeśvarasvāmin, who was a Sāmavedic Brāhmaṇa and highly skilled in the recitation of the Mahābhārata. This confirms that during this period in Bengal, those who recited and interpreted the Rāmāyaṇa and Mahābhārata were engaged in scriptural studies and enjoyed royal patronage.

In Bhojavarman's *Belava Copperplate Inscription*, it is stated that during that time the study of the "Trayī" (the three Vedas) was actively pursued. This indicates a widespread belief in the importance of Vedic study among the general populace. The inscription further informs us that members of the royal family earnestly strove for mastery in different branches of knowledge. Vajravarman, for instance, is described as the poet among poets and the scholar among scholars.

“अभवदथ कदाचिद्यादवीनां चमूनां समरविजयात्रामङ्गलं  
वज्रवर्मा।

शमन इव रिपूणां सोमवद्वानूवानां कविरपिकवीनां पण्डितः  
पण्डितानाम्॥<sup>12</sup>

The inscription also states that Jātavarman, the son of Vajravarman, the sovereign king of Bengal, was highly learned in the Vedas:

“विकलयन् गोवर्द्धनस्य श्रियं कुर्वन् श्रोत्रियसाच्छ्रियं विततवान् स्वां  
सार्वभौमश्रियम्”।<sup>13</sup>

Focusing on Āyurveda as one of the Upavedas, there was significant advancement in the field of medicine in eastern India. The Chinese traveler Xuanzang recorded that the study of medical science received special emphasis at the Nālandā University. Chakrapāṇidatta was a renowned physician of that era. His father served as a high-ranking official under King Narapāla of the Narayanapala dynasty. Chakrapāṇidatta’s celebrated work Chakradatta became a key text for physicians, though it remained largely inaccessible to the general public. In his Dravyaguṇasaṅgraha, he compiled lists and discussions of various herbal substances. His work Śabdacandrikā provides extensive glossaries of words related to different vegetables and mineral substances.

#### Conclusion:

Based primarily on inscriptions discovered in Bengal, this presentation outlines a picture of the education system during the Pāla period. It clearly shows that with the passage of time, under royal patronage, the study and practice of various branches of knowledge flourished extensively in different regions. The kings actively encouraged the study and teaching of Sanskrit. As a result, Sanskrit scholars and poets adorned the royal courts of ancient Bengal.

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