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Palas and Sovereignty: The Buddhist Empire of Eastern India

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Introduction

This book examines how a Buddhist imperial formation emerged and endured across the eastern reaches of the subcontinent between the eighth and twelfth centuries. Rather than treating the Palas as a backdrop for celebrated sculptures or as a footnote in political chronologies, I approach them as architects of a distinct mode of sovereignty rooted in monastic patronage, ritual legitimation, and riverine governance. The argument is straightforward: Buddhism was not merely ornament to kingship; it structured political authority, fiscal practice, and diplomatic outreach in ways that bound monasteries, market towns, and agrarian frontiers into a durable—if fluctuating—imperial system.

The chapters that follow integrate three bodies of evidence. First, epigraphic records—land grants, donative inscriptions, and seals—reveal how administrators named, measured, and governed the countryside. Second, art-historical materials—stone and bronze images, architectural programs, and manuscript illumination—disclose the visual and ritual vocabularies through which power was made sensible to subjects and pilgrims alike. Third, the traces of long-distance Buddhist networks—teachers, translators, and travelers—show how ideas and resources circulated between the Bay of Bengal and the Himalayan rim, and outward to Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia. Read together, these sources allow us to reevaluate the Palas not simply as patrons of learning, but as political thinkers who translated Buddhist concepts into institutions.

A central claim of this study is that monasteries functioned as infrastructural nodes. They stabilized agrarian expansion by organizing labor, storing surplus, and mediating disputes; they trained literate specialists who staffed courts and scriptoria; and they anchored circuits of pilgrimage and trade that linked fishing villages, ferry crossings, and markets to imperial centers. This monastic-infrastructural perspective helps explain how sovereignty extended across shifting river channels and monsoon ecologies, and why royal investments in religious architecture repeatedly coincided with efforts to regularize revenue and adjudication.

At the same time, Pala patronage was never ideologically monolithic. Court-sponsored ritual drew on a spectrum of Buddhist practices, including esoteric rites whose liturgies were adapted for public performance and royal consecration. Local religious life remained plural, with shared shrines, overlapping festivals, and devotees who moved fluidly between Buddhist, Śaiva, and Śākta settings. By tracking these entanglements at multiple scales—from village boundary stones to monumental gateways—we can see how imperial rhetoric accommodated, and sometimes strategically amplified, regional diversities.

Geography matters throughout this book. The deltaic and riverine landscapes of eastern India were not merely settings for politics; they were active participants. Floodplain soils, silted channels, and cyclone-prone coasts shaped where monasteries were built, how roads and ferries were planned, and when military campaigns could proceed. Attention to climate, water control, and environmental risk clarifies why land grants clustered in particular corridors and how religious endowments underwrote ecological resilience during scarcity.

Internationally, the Palas stood at the crossroads of Buddhist knowledge-making. Translation projects tied eastern India to Tibetan and Nepalese scholastic lineages; maritime itineraries connected ports to Sri Lanka and Southeast Asian centers, moving texts, pigments, ritual objects, and artisans across the Bay of Bengal. These exchanges did not simply export a “Pala style”; they transformed the polity itself by bringing new constituencies into the ambit of royal generosity and debate, and by positioning eastern India as a laboratory for doctrinal and artistic innovation.

Methodologically, I combine close readings of inscriptions with stylistic and technical analysis of artworks, while situating both within economic and legal histories of the countryside. The result is a political anthropology of a Buddhist empire: one that traces how authority was performed, delegated, and remembered; how monasteries balanced piety with property; and how images and manuscripts operated as instruments of governance as much as objects of devotion. Throughout, I highlight the roles of queens, donors, artisans, and officials whose actions complicate court-centric narratives.

This is a book for scholars and advanced readers who want to see how monastery networks and imperial administration were co-constitutive. It offers a framework for interpreting the Palas that neither romanticizes a golden age of Buddhism nor reduces the period to dynastic succession. By the end, I hope readers will recognize the eastern Indian Buddhist empire as a dynamic formation whose political ideas, economic choices, and artistic programs continue to shape how we imagine the medieval past—and how we understand the entanglements of religion and power in any age.

CHAPTER ONE: Landscapes of Power: Geography and Ecology of Eastern India

The Pala Empire, a powerful Buddhist dynasty that reigned from the 8th to the 12th century CE, found its stronghold in the fertile plains of Bengal and Bihar, a region intrinsically shaped by its dynamic geography and ecology. This eastern Indian landscape, far from being a mere passive backdrop, was an active participant in the unfolding of Pala statecraft, influencing everything from agrarian practices and trade routes to military strategies and the very fabric of daily life.

The most defining feature of this region is undoubtedly its intricate riverine system, dominated by the Ganges (Padma), Brahmaputra (Jamuna), and Meghna rivers and their countless tributaries and distributaries. These rivers created the vast Bengal Delta, a landscape of immense fertility, capable of sustaining dense populations through multiple rice harvests annually. The annual deposition of rich alluvial silt replenished the soils, making agriculture the backbone of the Pala economy. In fact, paddy cultivation was the chief source of economic prosperity during the Pala period.

Beyond mere sustenance, these waterways were the lifeblood of communication, transportation, and trade. Goods and people moved along these natural highways, connecting villages to markets, linking regional centers, and providing crucial access to the Bay of Bengal for maritime commerce. Major urban centers, including the Pala capitals of Gauda, Pataliputra, and Vikramapura, were strategically located on riverbanks, underscoring the rivers' importance in both civilian life and military campaigns.

The monsoon climate, a defining characteristic of eastern India, played a pivotal role in shaping agricultural cycles and the overall environment. Seasonal rains ensured a steady water supply for thriving crops, a critical factor in the region's agricultural abundance. However, the monsoon also brought its challenges. The delta was a dynamic and often unpredictable landscape, prone to catastrophic floods and shifting river courses. This inherent instability necessitated the development of sophisticated water management techniques, including canals, reservoirs, embankments, and dams, to regulate water flow, prevent flooding, and ensure year-round irrigation.

The Himalayas, while geographically distant, exerted a profound influence on the climate of eastern India. These towering mountains acted as a formidable barrier, preventing frigid continental air from sweeping south into the subcontinent, thereby keeping South Asia significantly warmer than other temperate regions at similar latitudes. Crucially, the Himalayas also trapped the moisture-laden southwesterly

monsoon winds, forcing them to release their precipitation over the Indian subcontinent, especially at the foothills. This orographic rainfall was essential for the agricultural prosperity of the Pala territories.

While primarily an agrarian society, the Pala Empire also possessed other valuable natural resources. Ancient Bengal was known for its salt production, carpentry, fabric-making, and sugar production. Although not extensively utilized, the knowledge of smelting iron ore existed, and copper deposits and pearls were also found within the empire's various regions. These resources, combined with a flourishing textile industry, contributed to the economic vitality of the Pala domain.

The topography of the region naturally created strategic advantages and challenges for the Pala rulers. The fertile Gangetic plain formed the core of their power, but the borders of their empire fluctuated due to constant hostilities with rival powers like the Gurjara-Pratiharas and the Rashtrakutas. Control over key river crossings and fortified cities along major rivers, such as Pataliputra and Monghyr (modern Munger), was paramount for military operations and protecting vital communication and transportation routes. Frontier defenses were also necessary to guard against external threats.

The diverse ecological landscape of eastern India also influenced settlement patterns and cultural developments. The Varendra region in northern Bengal, for instance, became a major center for Buddhist monasticism and learning, with significant institutions like Somapura Mahavihara. The deltaic regions of eastern Bengal, on the other hand, supported dense agrarian populations and maintained important local traditions. This regional variation within the broader imperial framework shaped the Pala Empire's cultural geography.

The abundance of water resources, while generally a boon, also presented challenges for the Palas. Changing river courses meant that settlements could be consumed by the waters, and the prevalence of stagnant, vegetation-choked deserted river branches could lead to malaria outbreaks. This constant interplay between bounty and peril demanded a resilient and adaptable approach to governance and land management.

The strategic location of the Bengal Delta, situated at the apex of the Bay of Bengal, facilitated extensive trade links with Southeast Asia, China, and the Middle East. Ports like Tamralipta (modern Tamluk) were crucial hubs for maritime trade, exporting textiles, spices, and precious stones. The Pala navy played both mercantile and defensive roles in the Bay of Bengal, highlighting the importance of the sea to their economic and political power.

Ultimately, the geography and ecology of eastern India were inseparable from the rise and endurance of the Pala Empire. The fertile plains, the extensive river networks, the

monsoon climate, and the strategic position at the crossroads of maritime trade routes all contributed to a unique environment that fostered a powerful agrarian economy, supported a vibrant Buddhist culture, and shaped the political landscape of medieval Bengal. The Palas, in turn, learned to harness these natural forces, developing administrative and infrastructural strategies that allowed them to thrive within this dynamic and often challenging landscape.

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