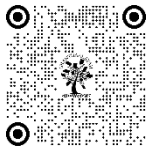


THE ENDURING LEGACY OF THE PALA EMPIRE: A RENAISSANCE OF CULTURE, KNOWLEDGE, AND HERITAGE

Dr. Manoj Kumar ¹✉

¹ Assistant Professor Department of AI & AS, R.P.M. College, Patna City, Patliputra University, Patna, Bihar, India



Corresponding Author

Dr. Manoj Kumar,
manojpallavi1984@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

The Pala Empire (8th–12th century CE) was one of the most significant dynasties of early medieval India, ruling over Bengal, Bihar, and parts of present-day Bangladesh. Founded by Gopala in the 8th century, the Pala rulers were known for their contributions to art, architecture, education, and religious development. Their patronage led to the flourishing of Buddhism, particularly Vajrayana Buddhism, and the expansion of Indian cultural influence beyond its borders, reaching Tibet and Southeast Asia.¹ The Pala era is marked by a remarkable synthesis of artistic styles, with a distinct sculptural and architectural tradition that left an indelible mark on Indian heritage. The rulers established major educational centers like Nalanda and Vikramashila, which became global centers of learning, attracting scholars from different parts of the world.² The impact of their contributions extended beyond their reign, influencing later Indian and Southeast Asian artistic and intellectual traditions. The Pala Empire played a crucial role in shaping Indian and global culture, leaving a lasting legacy in art, architecture, education, literature, and religion. As great patrons of Buddhism and Hinduism, the Palas nurtured the growth of monastic universities like Nalanda, Vikramashila, and Odantapuri, which became global centers of learning, attracting scholars from Tibet, China, and Southeast Asia.³ The Pala school of art, known for its intricate bronze sculptures and grand Buddhist viharas, influenced later artistic traditions in India, Nepal, Tibet, and Indonesia.⁴ Their literary and linguistic contributions laid the foundation for the development of early Bengali and Maithili scripts, while their spiritual patronage facilitated the spread of Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism across Asia. The cross-cultural exchanges initiated by the Pala rulers ensured that their legacy extended far beyond India, shaping the intellectual and artistic traditions of the broader Asian world.⁵

Keywords: Pala Empire, Pala Culture, Intellectual Heritage, Vikramashila, and Odantapuri

1. INTRODUCTION

The Pala Empire was a golden era of artistic and architectural excellence in early medieval India. The Pala rulers, primarily Buddhists, were great patrons of religion, art, and education. They played a crucial role in the development of the Pala School of Art, which had a profound influence on Indian and Southeast Asian artistic traditions. Their architectural and sculptural advancements not only enriched India's cultural heritage but also shaped the Buddhist art of Nepal, Tibet, and Myanmar. The artistic style that emerged during this period was characterized by refined stone and bronze sculptures, intricate temple architecture, and the flourishing of monumental Buddhist monasteries.⁶ One of the most remarkable aspects of Pala art was its sculptural tradition. Pala sculptures were primarily created using black basalt stone and bronze, showcasing an intricate level of detail, fluidity, and grace. The Buddhist sculptures from this era often depicted the Buddha in different postures, including the Bhumisparsha Mudra (earth-touching gesture), Dhyana Mudra (meditation posture), and Abhaya Mudra (gesture of reassurance and protection). Alongside Buddhist deities, the Pala

artists also sculpted Hindu and Jain figures, demonstrating the religious tolerance of the time. The depictions of Shiva, Vishnu, Durga, and various Jain Tirthankaras in sculptures from Bengal and Bihar highlight the diversity of artistic expression. The lost-wax bronze casting technique was widely used, particularly in the region of Kurkihar (Bihar), which became famous for its exquisite bronze images of the Buddha and Bodhisattvas. Many of these artworks were exported to Nepal and Tibet, influencing the development of Buddhist art in those regions.⁷

The Pala rulers also made significant contributions to monastic and temple architecture, particularly in the construction of Buddhist Mahaviharas (monasteries). Some of the most famous Buddhist monasteries built during this period include Somapura Mahavihara (Bangladesh), Vikramashila Mahavihara (Bihar), and Odantapuri Mahavihara (Bihar). The Somapura Mahavihara, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, is one of the largest and most well-preserved Buddhist monastic complexes in the world. It features a quadrangular layout with a central shrine surrounded by monastic cells, stupas, and smaller shrines. This architectural design influenced later Buddhist structures in Southeast Asia, particularly in Myanmar and Indonesia. Similarly, Vikramashila Mahavihara, built by Dharmapala, was a major center for Buddhist education and Tantric Buddhism, attracting scholars from Tibet, China, and Southeast Asia.⁸ These monasteries not only served as religious and educational centers but also played a key role in preserving and transmitting Buddhist knowledge to other parts of Asia. In addition to Buddhist architecture, the Pala rulers also patronized Hindu and Jain temples. Though most of these structures have not survived, inscriptions and archaeological evidence suggest that temples dedicated to Vishnu, Shiva, and other deities were constructed in the Nagara and Dravidian architectural styles. The remains of Pala-era Hindu temples found in Bhitargaon (Uttar Pradesh) and Bankura (West Bengal) suggest the use of brick and terracotta panels with elaborate carvings. Jain architecture also thrived under the Palas, particularly in Bihar and Bengal, where Jain temples and sculptures depicting the Tirthankaras in meditative postures were created.⁹

The influence of Pala art and architecture extended beyond India and played a crucial role in shaping Buddhist artistic traditions in Nepal, Tibet, and Southeast Asia. The Tibetan Buddhist pantheon and metalwork were significantly inspired by Pala bronze sculptures, and many Tibetan monasteries adapted Pala-style iconography in their paintings and carvings. Similarly, in Nepal, the Newari artists incorporated elements of Pala sculpture into their artistic traditions. In Southeast Asia, the architectural designs of the Borobudur temple in Indonesia and the temples of Pagan in Myanmar show clear influences of Pala architectural planning, particularly in the layout of stupas and mandalas. In conclusion, the Pala Empire's artistic and architectural legacy remains one of the most significant contributions to medieval Indian and Asian cultural history. Their patronage of Buddhist and Hindu temples, intricate sculptures, and monastic institutions not only enriched India's artistic traditions but also laid the foundation for Buddhist art in Tibet, Nepal, and Southeast Asia. The Pala rulers were truly the architects of India's medieval cultural heritage, and their artistic innovations continue to be admired by historians and art scholars worldwide.¹⁰

The Pala Empire (8th–12th century CE) was a golden age of manuscript production, particularly in the fields of Buddhism, philosophy, medicine, astronomy, and literature. The Palas were not only great patrons of art and architecture but also played a significant role in the development of palm-leaf and paper manuscripts, which became an essential medium for transmitting knowledge across India and neighboring regions like Tibet and Nepal. The Nalanda, Vikramashila, and Odantapuri Mahaviharas, the three great Buddhist monasteries of the Pala period, were centers of manuscript production where scholars carefully copied and illustrated religious and philosophical texts. These manuscripts played a crucial role in preserving Buddhist knowledge and influenced the scriptural traditions of Tibetan and Southeast Asian Buddhism. Pala manuscripts were primarily written on palm leaves, which were carefully processed to create a smooth writing surface. The script used in these manuscripts was Siddham and early Bengali script, which later evolved into the Tibetan and Nepalese scripts. The texts were often written in black ink, with headings and important passages highlighted in red. To protect the manuscripts, wooden covers (patra-pusta) were often decorated with intricate carvings and paintings. Some manuscripts were later copied onto paper, especially in the late Pala period.¹¹

One of the most significant contributions of the Pala Empire was the large-scale production of Buddhist scriptures. Important texts such as the Prajnaparamita Sutra, Avatamsaka Sutra, and Saddharmapundarika Sutra (Lotus Sutra) were meticulously copied and illustrated. These manuscripts were not only preserved in Indian monasteries but were also sent to Tibet, China, and Southeast Asia, where they played a key role in the development of Buddhist scholarship.¹² A famous example is the Ashtasahasrika Prajnaparamita manuscript, which was richly illustrated with miniature paintings of Buddhist deities and bodhisattvas. This tradition of manuscript illumination influenced the Tibetan Thangka paintings

and Nepalese manuscript art. The Tibetan script, which developed in the 7th–8th century CE, borrowed elements from the Siddham script of the Pala period, showing the deep intellectual and artistic exchanges between India and Tibet.¹³

One of the most remarkable features of Pala manuscripts was their miniature paintings. These paintings, found in Buddhist and Hindu texts, displayed the artistic excellence of the time. The illustrations often depicted Buddha, Bodhisattvas, Hindu deities, monks, and royal patrons, rendered in delicate lines and vibrant colors. The dominant colors included red, blue, green, and gold, which were obtained from natural minerals. These illustrated manuscripts were precursors to the later Mughal and Rajput miniature painting traditions.¹⁴ Although Buddhist texts dominated the manuscript tradition, Hindu and Jain scholars also produced significant works. Hindu texts like the Bhagavata Purana, Shiva Purana, and various Tantric texts were copied and illustrated in the Pala script. Jain manuscripts, containing Jain Agamas and philosophical treatises, were also created, though in smaller numbers. With the decline of the Pala Empire in the 12th century and the destruction of major Buddhist centers like Nalanda and Vikramashila by the Turkish invasions (Bakhtiyar Khilji, c. 1193 CE), many manuscripts were lost. However, some texts survived in Nepal and Tibet, where they were copied and preserved by Buddhist scholars. The impact of Pala manuscript traditions can still be seen in the illuminated texts of Tibetan and Nepalese Buddhism.¹⁵ The Pala Empire played a pivotal role in the preservation and dissemination of Indian knowledge through its manuscript tradition. The production of palm-leaf manuscripts, illustrated Buddhist texts, and Hindu philosophical works enriched medieval Indian culture and ensured the survival of ancient wisdom. The artistic and intellectual legacy of these manuscripts influenced Tibetan, Nepalese, and Southeast Asian literary traditions, making the Pala period a cornerstone of Indian manuscript heritage.

The Pala Empire (8th–12th century CE) was a golden age for education and intellectual advancements in India, particularly in the fields of Buddhist philosophy, logic, medicine, astronomy, and Sanskrit literature. The Palas were great patrons of learning, and their rule saw the establishment of world-renowned educational institutions such as Nalanda, Vikramashila, and Odantapuri Mahaviharas, which attracted scholars from Tibet, China, Nepal, and Southeast Asia.¹⁶ These universities were not only Buddhist centers but also taught subjects like Nyaya (logic), Vedanta, Sanskrit grammar, medicine (Ayurveda), and fine arts. The Pala period also witnessed the flourishing of Tantric Buddhism (Vajrayana), Madhyamaka, and Yogachara schools of philosophy, which significantly influenced Tibetan Buddhism. Many Buddhist scholars, such as Atisha Dipankara (982–1054 CE), who later helped in the revival of Buddhism in Tibet, were educated in Vikramashila. Another famous intellectual from this era was Santarakshita, who played a crucial role in spreading Indian Buddhist teachings to Tibet. Apart from Buddhist philosophy, Hindu and Jain scholars also thrived under the Pala rulers, contributing to the advancement of Sanskrit literature and theological debates. The composition and transmission of manuscripts were encouraged, leading to the preservation of classical Indian knowledge.¹⁷ With the destruction of these great institutions during the Turkish invasions (c. 12th century CE), many scholars fled to Nepal and Tibet, carrying with them the intellectual traditions of the Pala era. The Pala contribution to education was not only vital in medieval India but also laid the foundation for the preservation and transmission of Indian knowledge in the broader Asian world.¹⁸

The Pala Empire played a crucial role in shaping global education, particularly in the spread of Buddhist philosophy, logic, and scientific knowledge beyond India. The renowned universities of Nalanda, Vikramashila, and Odantapuri were not only centers of learning for Indian scholars but also attracted students from Tibet, China, Korea, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Southeast Asia. Tibetan Buddhist scholars, such as Atisha Dipankara (982–1054 CE), who later revitalized Buddhism in Tibet, were trained at Vikramashila under the guidance of Dharmakirti and Santarakshita. The intellectual exchanges between Pala scholars and Tibetan monks led to the development of Tibetan Buddhist texts and monasteries, many of which still preserve the Tantric and Mahayana traditions of the Pala period. Chinese travelers and Buddhist monks, including Xuanzang and Yijing, documented their admiration for Indian educational institutions, highlighting their vast libraries and structured curriculum.¹⁹ The Pala tradition also influenced Southeast Asian Buddhist education, as seen in the artistic and architectural similarities between Indian monasteries and the Borobudur temple in Indonesia. The transmission of Sanskrit Buddhist texts to Nepal, Tibet, and China ensured that Indian knowledge systems, including medicine, astronomy, and logic, shaped intellectual traditions across Asia.²⁰ Even after the decline of the Pala Empire, the knowledge disseminated through these global educational networks continued to impact Tibetan, Chinese, and Southeast Asian philosophical and religious traditions, cementing the Pala legacy in world history.

The Pala rulers were great patrons of Buddhism, Hinduism, and Jainism, fostering a pluralistic and spiritually rich environment in medieval India. As devout Mahayana Buddhists, the Pala kings, such as Dharampala (r. 770–810 CE) and Devapala (r. 810–850 CE), supported the growth of Vajrayana Buddhism, which later spread to Tibet, Nepal, and

Southeast Asia. The construction of great Buddhist mahaviharas (monastic universities) like Nalanda, Vikramashila, and Odantapuri provided a platform for Buddhist monks and scholars to develop and disseminate their teachings.²¹ The Pala rulers also played a key role in the compilation and preservation of Buddhist texts, many of which were later translated into Tibetan and Chinese. Atisha Dipankara, one of the most influential Buddhist teachers, was a product of this intellectual and spiritual environment and helped revive Buddhism in Tibet.²² Apart from Buddhism, the Palas also extended patronage to Hindu temples and Shaiva and Vaishnava traditions, evident from temple remains like the Somapura Mahavihara in present-day Bangladesh, which housed Hindu deities alongside Buddhist images. Additionally, Jainism found support among scholars and merchants under the Pala rule, leading to the preservation of Jain scriptures and traditions.²³ The Pala contribution to religious and spiritual thought had a far-reaching impact, shaping Tibetan Buddhism, the spread of Tantric practices, and the fusion of Hindu and Buddhist art forms across Asia.

The Pala Empire (8th–12th century CE) witnessed remarkable growth in literature and linguistic development, particularly in Sanskrit, Prakrit, and early Bengali. The Pala rulers were great patrons of learning, and their support for scholars led to the composition and preservation of numerous literary and philosophical works.²⁴ Sanskrit literature flourished, with texts on Buddhist philosophy, logic (Nyaya), poetry, grammar, and science being composed in Pala courts and monasteries. Dharampala and Devapala supported Buddhist scholars such as Haribhadra, Santarakshita, and Atisha Dipankara, whose works greatly influenced Tibetan Buddhist thought. The Pala period was also significant for the development of Tantric Buddhist texts, many of which were written in Sanskrit and later translated into Tibetan and Chinese. The rise of early Bengali and Maithili languages can also be traced back to this period, with inscriptions and literary works showing the transition from classical Sanskrit to regional vernaculars.²⁵ The Gaudi script, a precursor to modern Bengali script, evolved during the Pala rule, influencing later linguistic developments in eastern India. The Pala contribution to literature and linguistics not only enriched Indian intellectual traditions but also shaped Tibetan, Nepalese, and Southeast Asian literary cultures, ensuring the long-lasting impact of their scholarly advancements.²⁶

The cultural contributions of the Pala Empire (8th–12th century CE) had a profound and lasting influence on both Indian and global civilizations, particularly in the fields of art, architecture, education, religion, and literature.²⁷ Within India, the Pala school of art, characterized by its intricate bronze and stone sculptures of Buddhist and Hindu deities, greatly influenced later artistic traditions, including those of the Chola and Vijayanagara empires.²⁸ Architecturally, the Somapura Mahavihara (Bangladesh), Vikramashila, Nalanda, and Odantapuri monasteries became the blueprint for later monastic complexes in Tibet and Southeast Asia. The Palas' patronage of Buddhism played a crucial role in preserving and developing Mahayana and Vajrayana traditions, which later spread to Nepal, Tibet, China, and Southeast Asia.²⁹ Eminent Buddhist scholars like Atisha Dipankara and Santarakshita, trained under the Pala rulers, were instrumental in revitalizing Tibetan Buddhism, while the translation of Sanskrit texts into Tibetan, Chinese, and Mongolian enriched the spiritual traditions of Asia. Pala-era manuscripts, written in Sanskrit and early Bengali, played a key role in the linguistic and literary development of eastern India, influencing later Bengali, Maithili, and Assamese scripts.³⁰ The Pala legacy also reached as far as Java, Sumatra, and Sri Lanka, where Buddhist art, architecture, and Tantric practices bore strong Indian influences.³¹ Through their extensive cultural patronage and intellectual exchanges, the Palas left an indelible mark on Indian and global traditions, fostering an era of cross-cultural interaction that shaped the artistic, religious, and literary landscapes of South and Southeast Asia.

The Pala Empire (8th–12th century CE) stands as one of the most significant dynasties in Indian history, known for its remarkable contributions to art, architecture, education, religion, and literature. As great patrons of Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism, the Palas played a key role in the preservation and global dissemination of Buddhist philosophy, particularly through the monastic universities of Nalanda, Vikramashila, and Odantapuri, which attracted scholars from Tibet, China, and Southeast Asia. The Pala school of art, with its exquisite bronze sculptures and grand monasteries like Somapura Mahavihara, influenced artistic traditions across South and Southeast Asia. Linguistically, the Palas contributed to the evolution of Sanskrit literature and the early Bengali script, laying the foundation for later linguistic developments. Their diplomatic and cultural exchanges with Tibet, Nepal, and Southeast Asia helped shape the intellectual and spiritual traditions of the broader Asian world. Despite their decline due to invasions, the cultural and intellectual legacy of the Pala rulers continues to resonate, underscoring their role as architects of India's medieval cultural and intellectual heritage. The enduring impact of their patronage is evident in the surviving manuscripts, architectural marvels, and the spread of Indian knowledge systems across Asia, ensuring that the Pala era remains a defining period in the history of Indian civilization.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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None.

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