

THE PALAS

(PART-1)

B.A, PART-2, PAPER-3

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INTRODUCTION

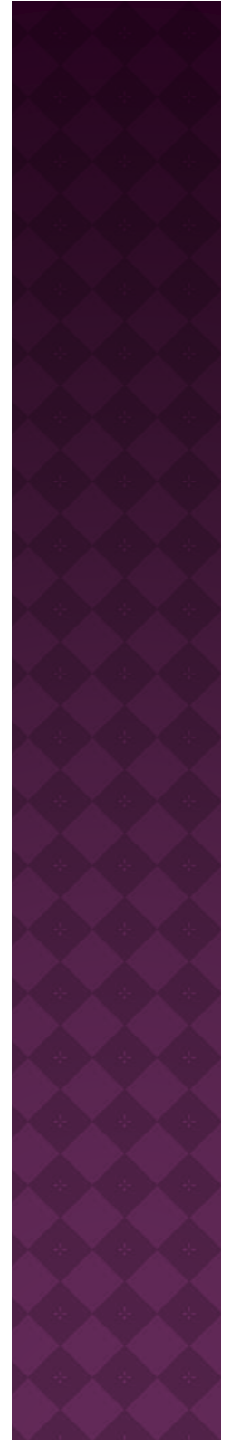
Bengal played a leading role in Indian politics between the 8th and the 11th centuries. This was the age of the famous Pala dynasty, some of whose rulers were the ablest in ancient India. For nearly a century after Harsha's death in 647 A.D, Bengal had been subject to much interference and disruption by its near and farther neighbours. The respite came in 765 A.D. with the election by the people of an able leader, ***Gopala***, who was neither a brahman nor a kshatriya. The dynasty prospered under Gopala's successors, ***Dharamapala*** and ***Devapala***. The Palas realised the importance of ***Madhyadesha*** in the Indian political sphere , and fought hard to gain power and influence there.

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Their main rivals, of course, were the *Gurjara-Pratiharas* and the *Rashtrakuta*, although with the latter there were useful marriage alliances. In the triangular contest over Madhyadesha and Kanauj, all three dynasties ultimately exhausted themselves. However, the fact that the Palas were ever-present, asserting their right to reorder affairs to their advantage, meant that Bengal was no longer on the margins of the Indian polity. Over different periods of time, the dynasty also *ruled over Bihar, Odisha and Assam*. The Bengal kingdom's reputation reached beyond the boundaries of India, into Nepal and Tibet and, above all, towards Southeast Asia, in Java, Sumatra and the Malay Peninsula ruled by the *Shailendra dynasty*. Commerce and religion linked the fortunes of Bengal, Tibet and Nepal. There was also the desire for territorial power.

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The Palas during the rule of Dharamapala extended their suzerainty in Assam. Pala suzerainty in Bengal and eastern India lasted until the end of the 11th century, when they were succeeded by the Senas, who, in turn, lost out to the Turkish Khaljis in the thirteenth century.



ORIGIN OF THE PALAS

The Palas appeared in the political scenario after the death of *Sasanka*, when there was great political upheaval in Bengal. There *are no clear evidences of the origin and early history of the Palas*. Epigraphic sources of the contemporary era and official Pala records are generally silent about the caste, origin and early history of the Palas. Since no clear evidence is available, historians had to depend on indirect evidences, which shed light on the reign of the Palas in Bengal. Hence *there are enough controversies among historians about the origin and ancestry of the Palas*. From official records of the Palas it is known that *Gopala's father was Vapyata and his grandfather was Dayita Vishnu*. They are mentioned in a very

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general tone without referring to any royal or exalted status. In their inscriptions the Palas do not claim descent from any mythical figure or epic hero like contemporary dynasties. The *Khalimpur plate* of Dharmapala informs us that Gopala I, the founder of the dynasty, was the son of 'khanditarati (killer of enemies) Vapyata and grandson of 'sarva-avadata' Dayitavisnu. From this it seems that before Gopala I this family was not of much importance. In the commentary on '*Astahasika-Prajnaparamita*' by *Haribhadra*, Dharmapala has been described as 'Rajabhatadi-vamsa- patita'. On the basis of facts provided by *poet Baribhadra*, contemporary to the second Pala king Dharmapala, some scholars have suggested that the Pala kings were connected to king Rajabhata of the Buddhist Khadga of eastern Bengal.

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Again some scholars have provided other views about the origin of the Palas. They have opined on the basis of evidences from Khalimpur Copper Plate that the *Palas were originally descendants of the Bhadra Dynasty*. Moreover controversy lies in the fact that the Palas themselves claimed to be solar descendants. Though the early Palas did not declare themselves any mythical ancestry, yet the *later Palas claimed themselves as solar descendants or "Surya Kula"*. Sandhyakara Nandi in "Rama Charita", Ghanarama in "Dharma Mangala" and other chronicles of the Age referred to Samudra Kula, or the *'origin of the Palas from Ocean'*.

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Although there are no conclusive evidences about the origin and ancestry of the Palas, yet it has been opined by historians that the *Palas were Kshatriya by caste*. Evidences supplied by "*Ramcharita*" and *Taranatha* corroborates the above theory. This was further supported by their matrimonial relationship with the Rashtrakutas and the Kalachuriyas. Again according to *another group of historians the Palas did not belong to any higher caste*. In "*Arya-manjusri-mula-kalpa*", the Palas were described as "*Dasajivina*" or *Sudra by occupation*. A medieval Muslim writer, *Abul Fazal*, depending on this tradition had *described the Palas as "kayasthas"*. But *modern scholars* have opined that the *Palas were staunch Buddhists, depending on official records of the Palas*.

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Their court had become the stronghold of Buddhism. Copper plates of the Pala kings bore a clear mark of their Buddhist affiliation. Though it is not known whether the founder of the Pala dynasty in Bengal was originally of Buddhist origin, yet there is evidence that the Pala kings held an important position in the international Buddhist world.

The original homeland of the Pala kings or the actual extent of the kingdom of Gopala, the founder king, cannot exactly be determined. Taranatha says that Gopala was elected to the vacant throne of Vanga some years after the rule of the Candra dynasty. His evidence is not reliable unless it is corroborated by some other sources.

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Sandhyakarauandi's 'Ramacarita' and the Kamauli grant refer to Verendra as the 'janakabhu' (fatherland) of the Palas, and from this it would seem that *northern Bengal was their original home*. The Tibetan historian further records that Gopala extended his power over Magadha. The extension of power from Varendra to Magadha was natural rather than from Vanga to Magadha.

The century that followed the death of Sasanka was marked with political upheavals, extreme chaos and foreign invasion. Peace within the province was horribly disturbed. Moreover after the death of Sasanka, Harshavardhana and the Kamrupa king Bhaskarvarmana had annexed Bengal or Gauda. Later a strong wave of the Tibetan invasion swept away remnants of the political stability of Bengal.

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The ultimate result was that, the entire province of Bengal was divided into several small provincial units, who unfurled the flag of independence. Each one struggled for the mastery of land. The absence of any central authority or Government made the situation even more anarchic, which vitally affected the situation. Ultimately the state of anarchy in Bengal came to an end when Gopala ascended the throne. It is known from facts of the *Khalimpur Copper Plate* that ***Gopala was made emperor by popular support.*** The people in order to put an end to this lawlessness established him as the central authority and thus Gopala appeared in the political scenario of Bengal.

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Gopala was an eminent chief and a competent military general. It is presumed that Gopala did not possess royal blood because he was not born in a high and distinguished family. But it was just because of his martial and exceptional leadership qualities that he was chosen the leader of the lawless country. The main achievement of Gopala was that he had established durable peace within Bengal by removing the prevailing state of anarchy. Gopala became the king of Bengal and supremacy of the Pala kings was established in 8th century A.D, which continued uninterrupted till 12th century.

(To be continued)

