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# Historical Importance of Tamralipta in the Spread of Buddhism in Coastal Bengal and Its Impact on Southeast Asia

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**Abstract:** Buddhism originated in the holy land of India, but interestingly, it gained popularity in other countries. Specially the Southeast Asian countries accepted Buddhism full heartedly and did a lot of spiritual practices on the teachings of lord Buddha. The ancient and most prolonged international relations of India was established with Southeast countries due to Buddhism. In this context, the eastern coastal regions undoubtedly connected during the spread of Buddhism. During ancient times, India was connected to Southeast countries with three routes. The Uttarpatha (Northern route), the southern route (Dakshinpatha), and the maritime routes across the Indian Ocean. The famous silk route comes under the Northern route. The maritime route to Southeast Asia has become very famous among the foreign Buddhist followers but the history of the spread of Buddhism in the coastal areas cannot be particularly noted. Therefore, the spread of Buddhism in the coastal areas of ancient Bengal and how Buddhism spread through South-East Asian countries from this coastal region needs apt attention for exclusive discussion. That is why, in the present context, the historical Importance of Tamralipta for the spread of Buddhism in the Coastal Bengal and its impact on Southeast Asia has been selected for discussion. In that case, the geographical details of the coastal region of ancient Bengal, why Buddhism spread in this region, how different dynasties, traders, merchants, householders, and common people had supported and accepted, how did Buddhism interact with this coastal region commercially, and how did Buddhism spread from the coastal region to Southeast Asian countries are the main purpose of this research paper. It also tries to understand the correlation between the trade route and the transmission of Buddhism.

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**Keywords:** Buddhism, Tamralipti, Monasteries, Mauryan Dynasty, Cultural Exchange, Archaeology, Port City

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## Introduction

The foundation of Buddhism had a great event in the history of India. It is having far reaching consequences in India and abroad. In world history, the 6th century BCE is undoubtedly an accomplished period for human civilization. Jainism and Buddhism

are the two world's most accepted spiritual dogmas that have discarded the mythological and ritualistic explanation of the belief system and established logical, rational, and philosophical understanding of supreme power. Owing to this very fact, both religions have gained huge popularity in India while Buddhism enthusiastically got a never-ending place in the minds and hearts of the people of the Far East and Southeast Asian countries. The historical sources give a flood of light on the cultural and commercial relations of India with South Asian and Far East Asian countries. Apparently, the role of Buddhism in India's external affairs is far more decisive and sturdily impactful than any other factor. For this reason, India still successfully maintained conciliatory relations with her South Asian and far East Asian countries, irrespective of political issues.

The perpetuality of Buddhist studies in relation to its ideology, art, culture, and history make it more relevant with time. On one hand, its broad dimension of culture and religion are the most favoured topics in research. On the other hand, Buddhist history is an exclusive area of concern for researchers. All the events related to the birth of Gautam Buddha, his early and wandering life in search of Moksha, Buddhahood, and preaching, and lastly, his salvation, give immense information about that period. At this background, the geographical areas related to Buddhism have great significance because these areas are still giving archaeological sources as well as providing concrete evidence in support of written historical documents. In this regard, the discussion of the coast and understanding of the historical importance of Buddhism in the coastal ancient Bengal is subject to serious challenges, and it is a relevant issue in the present time to revisit Tamralipti from a new perspective.

## **Tamralipti: The Ancient Port City**

Tamralipti is an ancient famous port of India in general and exclusively of Bengal, served as a voyage destination to all the coastal countries of south Asia. Remarkably, it was during the Mauryan dynasty India had touched the zenith of its prosperity through the abundance of natural resources, a powerful and stable kingdom (that was quite larger than the present India), art, and culture. With this highly supportive background, India had entered into a healthy trade relationship with the neighboring countries. Further, the initial trade relation with foreign countries had turned into a deeper bond of faith, emotions, and devotion when the wave of Buddhism started blowing out of the boundaries of India. It was during that time the traders, with great hope, had looked at the coastal part of Bengal, to use it as a navigation corridor. Thus, the growth of Tamralipti as a port was a demand of time that had supported by its natural dockyard suitability. In history Tamralipti has been referred as a port place since the 1st century BCE to 8th century CE (Akhtar and Idris 2022: 2).

The historical and numismatic, epigraphic, and archaeological data of Tamralipti give clear indications of the external connection of Bengal (present Bengal and Bangladesh) with the countries like Indonesia, Laos, Java, Sumatra, China, Malaysia, etc. As a port, Tamralipti not only gives information on the economic, socio-cultural, and political

history of Bengal but as a geographical area, Tamralipti has greatly contributed to the expansion of Buddhism as well as the establishment of cultural relations with old Bengal and countries across the Indian ocean that almost cover a long span of 900 years. Undoubtedly, Tamralipti played a vital role in the retainment of Buddhism in Bengal till the 8th century CE, while the other part of India witnessed the sharp loss of interest in Buddhism. Not only that, but the involvement of Tamralipti in the formation of the social and cultural structure of Bengal is also noteworthy.

Before discussing the relation of Tamralipti with Buddhism and the presence of Buddhism in Bengal, it is worthy to mention why Tamralipti was credited for the port city. The current name of Tamralipti is Tamluk, situated in the strategic location of Medinipur district of present West Bengal state of India but it is very close to Bangladesh as well. Tamralipti is located on the bank of the river Rupnarayan, which means it is located at the confluence of river and sea, making it favorable for a port because it is close to the seashore and at the same time to the Bay of Rupnarayan River. The geographical condition of that place is suitable for the dockyard.

During ancient time this location was preferred by the traders. If we see the political condition of that period, i.e., from the 1st century BCE to the 8th Century CE, prelude a clear reason for the selection of Tamralipti as a port city. One obvious reason is its natural suitability for the dockyard. The other very important cause was its distance to Patliputra which provided a short way at the same time Tamralipti was well connected with the Patliputra through land artery across present West Bengal and Jharkhand. In addition to Patliputra, Tamralipti was well connected with other minor and major Buddhist pilgrim and institutional places. Thus, Tamralipti being a famous port was also known for one of the most favourite Buddhist highways, that connected to major arteries, minor capillaries, and shortcut pathways, that were used back and forth between destinations. Apparently, these roads were very often used by merchants, monks, and the general public for religious and economic purposes, and Tamralipti was a kingpin of all the multidirectional cross-cultural and overseas economic movements.

It is again a pertinent question to understand how Tamralipti has shaped the mode of belief system in Bengal. The presence of the Buddhism in the city of Pundravardhana during the time of the great emperor Ashoka is mentioned in a story of Divyavadana. Two inscriptions dated to the 2nd century BC on the bezel of the Buddhist Stupa at Sanchi refer to two tribal donations from Pundravardhan. This proves that Buddhism was spread in the Pundranvardhan region i.e., a region in the northern part of West Bengal and Bangladesh during the time of Ashoka. Another important ancient territory of Bengal was Tamralipta, which is also a famous ancient port. According to Mahavamsa (Geiger 1912: 80), the Tamralipta was under the Asokan kingdom. So, it's confirmed that during the Asokan times, Buddhism flourished in this region. The Nagarjunakonda inscriptions of the 3rd century BCE also prove the presence of Buddhism in the Bengal region.

The importance of Buddhism of the coastal regions of Bengal lies in recording the course of historical and cultural developmental scenery occupied by different social groups. The influence of Buddhism on the motherland is weak and, after abandoning it and migrating to other neighbouring countries, Buddhism relocates for a long time to the east, especially designating Bengal as its home. It is not possible to shed light on how Buddhism came to Bengal. However, it is generally said that this religion originated in Bengal with Jains and Ajivakas. This religion gained special importance during Emperor Ashoka. However, at that time there is doubt about the establishment of this religion in Bengal. Mainly from the Gupta reign, Buddhism had a special influence in the coastal areas of ancient Bengal. After that Rathas, Nathas, Khadgas, Chandra, Deva and Palas dynasty supported to this religion. Besides, the Buddhist centres that were established in the coastal areas of ancient Bengal, such as Chittagong (Chittagong), Chandraketugarh, Patharpratima, Atghara, Tilpi-Dhosha, Tamralipta, the newly discovered Mogalmari, etc. Among them Tamralipta was an important Buddhist site in this region and was played a key role in the transmission of Buddhism in the Southeast Asian Countries. The position of Tamralipti makes it extraordinary where economic and cultural transnational interactions vividly touched all sections of the society and led to cross-cultural exchange.

The present study analytically emphasised to record the Buddhist influence in the making of littoral society. Due to the crossroad position of Tamralipti, its central and peripheral areas have caused a multifarious economic zone and trans-cultural society. To do so, the study examines the archaeological findings and other historical records and the ethno-archaeological parameters. The methodology of the latter helps to untie the dissimilar strands of survival approaches accepted in the coastal stretch. Farming and non-farming as well as maritime activities have been compartmentally visualized in the class of different social groups.

Tamralipta is an ancient city. From the Mahabharata period, we have been introduced to Tamralipta. Literary and archaeological material suggests that from the 3rd century B.C.E to the 8th century C.E, Tamralipta was a port city and the main centre of Buddhism in Bengal during ancient times. Tamralipta was known as various names like, Tamalites, (Majumdar 1963:29, Sastri 1984:438) Damalipta, Tamalipta, Tamaline, Tamalipti, Vishnugriha, Stambapura, Tamralipti, Velakula, Tamalika, Tamraliptaka, Tamraliptika (Kale 1966:287) as evident from foreign and indigenous sources. According to historians, Ashok was attacked Kalinga through the way of Tamralipta. The Jataka stories show that Buddhism flourished on the Subrnabhumi through the coastal region. (Tripathi and Rao 1944: 33-39) Ashok's son, Mahendra, and daughter, Sanghamitra, went to Sri Lanka from the Tamralipta port to preach religion (Bhikku 2006: 101-110). Another source suggests that the Tamralipta was included in the Kalinga country. During the Ramayana period, the Kalinga kingdom extended to Gangasagar (Bharati 1921: 8). According to W.W. Hunter, the Tamluk kingdom was previously 200 miles in circumference and the sea was close to Tamluk at that time. He referred to Tamralipta as a Buddhist port from where trade was practiced in the east

coast. He also mentioned some Buddhist monasteries in this region (Hunter 1872: 83). It is mentioned in the Mahavamsa that Emperor Ashok himself came to Tamralipta once, because some of the Sinhalese envoys and brought them aboard (Jana 1347: 52). Buddhist texts Dathavamsa indicate that the sacred dent of Buddha was transmitted to Sinhala in the 4th century B.C.E through the Tamralipta coast (Davids 1884: 109-151).

Tamralipta in the history of Buddhism in the coastal region of Bengal was a great significant. Many Chinese pilgrimages visited India, and among all of them were given descriptions of the importance of Buddhism in Tamralipta. Fa-hien who visited India in the 5th century C.E. was also visited Bengal mainly to Tamralipta. According to him, Buddhism was flourishing in the seaport of south Bengal, and he saw 22 Buddhist monasteries, all of which were filled with monks. The law made by Buddha also flourished there. Fa-hien stayed here for two years and wrote his sutras and drew images related to Buddha life and preaching (Legge 1886: 100). It is to be noted that Fa-hien's accounts were very authentic because he gave the names of the 22 monasteries with their locations and other details about them.

The Chinese traveler Hiuen-Tsang also visited Tamralipta and saw ten monasteries with a congregation of thousand monks of the Sarvastivada School. Near the capital there was a stupa, about 200 feet high, which was believed to have been built by the great king Asoka and he also added that there were foot print of four previous Buddha (Beal 1906: 200-201). Two centuries before Fa-hien visited Tamralipta, here he found twenty two Buddhist monasteries, but after two centuries the number of monasteries decreased and the number was only ten according to Hiuen-Tsang (Beal 1906: 200-201). Tachengteng, a pupil of Hiuen-Tsang, also visited Tamralipta and stayed there for twelve years and acquired great knowledge of Sanskrit texts, when he was residing here in a vihara, called Poloho (Takakusu 1896: 33). Taolin, another Chinese pilgrimage also visited Tamralipta and lived there for three years, for learning Sanskrit and also himself initiated to the Sarvastivada School (Majumder 1963: 474). The name of the monastery which Taolin stayed and studied is not known. These two Chinese travelers also corroborated the evidence furnished by Hiuen-Tsang about Tamralipta. I-tsing came in India in 671 and stayed up to 695 C.E. He also visited Tamralipta and saw five or six monasteries there (Takakusu 1896: 34). I-tsing met TaChengteng in a monastery called Bharaha, spent some time there, and learned Sanskrit and Savdavidya. He gave a detailed account of this monastery along with its administration and organisation. He also translated a Sanskrit Buddhist text the Nagarjuna Bodhisattava Suvrillekha into Chinese language there (Patra 1991: 4-7). It thus appears that from the beginning of the 5th century till the third quarter of 7th century C.E. there was a steady decrease of monasteries in Tamralipta. This may have been due to a general decline in the position of the Buddhists in this part of Bengal and lack of effort to maintain and preserve the old monasteries. But it is not possible that the decline had not actually been so marked.

All these historical and archaeological accounts undoubtedly indicate the development of Tamralipti as a powerful educational, religious, economic, and cosmopolitan

cultural center. The sources also unveil that the symbiotic relationship between Tamralipti and Buddhism was responsible for this kind of mutual development. The richness of Tamralipti, has tremendously attracted the rural of that time to make it the part of their kingdom. Tamralipta was (for some time) conquered by the Bhauma-kara kings of Orissa, in the 9th century C.E. But it was recaptured during the Pala's time and came to be a part of Bengal. Terracotta with a relic of Buddha in Bhumi-parsamudra and with the Buddhist creed in Gupta characters was found at Panna near Tamralipta. It was a flourishing Buddhist center before the Pala period and contained to be a center of Buddhist activities during the Palas period also (Mahapatra 1995: 61).

It is to be noted that when Chinese pilgrimage Fa-hien, Hiuen-Tsang and I-tsing came to India and when Dandin wrote *Dasakumaracharita*, Tamralipta was a principal emporium of trade and the place for embarkation for Ceylon, Java, China in the east and the land of the Yavanas in the west (Ramachandran 1956: 226-239). In overseas trade and commerce, the port on east and west coast of India played a vital role since 3rd millennium B.C.E. Comparatively, the geographical setting was found to be most ideal for the development of maritime trade and played an important role for the spread of Buddhism in others country from the coastal Tamralipta (Tripathi and Rao 1944: 33-39). According to W.W. Hunter, Tamluk was originally a Buddhist town and a large emporium of eastern traders and many fine monasteries (Hunter 1872: 83).

Many scholars believe that the temple of Borgvima at Tamralipta was a Buddhist monastery. It is believed that at one time the Brahmins built a Kali temple on this Buddhist monastery. In the 12th century, when the influence of Buddhism began to diminish in Tamralipta or the Buddhists were displaced from here, the monastery became an abandoned place at the seashores (Jana 1347: 52). The structure of this temple clearly reflects the Buddhist culture and artistic thinking. Just as in the case of the Puri Temple, it is heard in some places that it was a Buddhist temple. From a famous song of Chandidas, it is believed that Jagannatha, Balaram, and Subhadra are the symbols of Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha.

*"Puna ta tajiya Buddha abatara  
Haila murti tin  
Jagannatha r bhagni Sahodara  
Subhadra tahate chin"*

(Mukhopadhyay 1321: 21)

Some archaeologists believe that the present temple was built on this stupa, which was under the patronage of Emperor Ashoka. The top of this temple is like the temple of Orissa but the inner structure is like Buddhagaya. There is a small monastery similar to the main monastery in front of the main entrance (Hunter 1973:65). This temple is located about 30 feet above the plane. However, it should be remembered that this temple was made of stone and brick, but the Tamluk landscape is flat, and there are no mountains near this lowland. It is believed that these stones were brought here from

some far area. It is thought that this square temple was built so high to protect the temple from the tide of the sea.

Thus, one can see that how Tamralipti is associated with Buddhism from the initial stage of its emergence. Specially during Ashoka regime this port city have got limelight that continued till 8th century CE. After looking at the footsteps of all the travellers who left behind the traces of their works in the form of documents, records and writings give amply prove of the symbiotic relationship of Tamralipti with Buddhism. Exceptionally the reputed status of Tamralipti was the legacy of trade and Buddhism both. The prosperity of old temples and historical sources about Tamralipti show a deeper and stronger connection between Buddhism and trade. In other words, both the components (trade and Buddhism) were intermingled with each other, which ultimately made the Tamralipti the most favored place for the traders and Buddhist followers.

However, the reference of Tamralipti in epic texts (Mahabharata and Ramayan), unambiguously tells the flourishing of Tamralipti well before Buddhism. But it is also to be accepted that Buddhism gave name and fame to Tamralipti. In the above notes one has understood that how the foreign travellers specially the Chinese Buddhist monks made it the Buddhist religious, educational, and cultural centre. Apparently, the growth of Buddhism in Tamralipti, is all because of economic reasons. The traders as an investor invested on construction, donations, and mentorship just for the charitable purposes. It also facilitated the building up of a warm cross-cultural relationship. Therefore, the transmission of Buddhism in India was due to economic growth. This clear fact gets support from the archaeological discoveries that were discovered on all the Buddhists arteries, destinations, and centres.

During the primitive transportation system these Buddhist centres were developed as the halt places for the traders, travellers, and pilgrims. According to Neelis, “since both itinerant monks and coenobitic communities inhabiting residential monasteries depended upon donations for material support, the dynamic growth of Buddhist institutions was directly linked with the generations surplus resources. Thus, Buddhist transmission, which involved transforming basic ideas and common practices through interactions with local host cultures and other religious traditions, was symbiotically related to parallel processes of commercial and cultural exchanges” (Jason 2011:1-2).

Let’s talk about the role of Tamralipti in the spread of Buddhism in Southeast Asia. The location of Tamralipti is crucially very strategic since, on the one hand, it is well connected with the Patliputra (the political center/capital of ancient India), and on the other hand, it provides the shortest distance for overseas transportation. Added to that, it was already developed as a port during pre-Buddhist time. Therefore, after the emergence of Buddhism, the monks preferred to opt for the Tamralipti as a landing place in India. With the passing of time, Tamralipti gradually became famous as a Buddhist center since many Buddhist exchanges were generated afterward. As

mentioned in the above paragraph regarding the existence of Buddhist monasteries, educational institutions etc. The importance of Tamralipti in the spread of Buddhism can be understood by looking at the network of pathways that are ultimately connected to this port city. These pathways were interchangeably used for religious and economic purposes. At the background of Tamralipti as a port and Buddhist centre, the role of royal patronage should not be overlooked. Because as a coenobitic religion Buddhist religious affair was conducted through sold system of monasteries and educational institutions, which gradually expanded in Southeast Asian countries.

Zurcher's idea of the basic pattern of diffusion of religion also indicates why the wondering monks and nuns strongly preferred Tamralipti. According to Zurcher the pattern was followed in which the monks and nuns had built a residential monastery at the place close to agricultural and commercial zone that was connected by trade and travel routes as contact expansion. He further says, "diffusion by contact expansion required adequate generated by lay donors (danapatis) to support economically "parasitic" communities of monk and nuns". Taking the pattern of diffusion of Zurcher gives clearer picture for why Tamralipti had played greater part in the overseas transmission of Buddhism (Jason 2011: 4-5).

It would be unfair if Tamralipti were created for the transmission of Buddhism to South and Southeast Asia due to its position as an international port city. In fact, Tamralipti was the place of full economic activities in which trading, import, and export, selling, purchasing, agriculture had been growing prior to the advancement of Buddhism. Thus, being the renowned commercial city, Tamralipti was highly preferred by the monks, and nuns.

## Conclusion

Thus, based on the above data, it becomes quite clear that Tamralipti is credited for the spread of Buddhism to the South and Southeast Asian countries for three main reasons. First, it was a commercially rich port city in ancient India. Second- for 900 years, Tamralipti uninterruptedly enjoyed the status of an international port city of ancient India that made it inevitably a central place for cultural, economic, and political power. The historical and archaeological sources tell that no other port had been developed in that coastal area other than Tamralipti. And third- it was well connectivity with Patliputra and other important Buddhist centres of India and South and Southeast Asian countries.

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