



THE PALA DYNASTY

(750–1174 CE)



MANUSCRIPTS

*Astasahasrika Prajnaparamita
Manuscript dated 983 CE. This
rare manuscript is now in the
possession of the Asiatic Society
Museum, Kolkata*

The earliest examples of miniature painting in India exist in the form of illustrations to the religious texts on Buddhism executed under the Palas of the eastern India and the Jain texts executed in western India during the 11th-12th centuries A.D. The Pala period (750 A.D. to the middle of the 12th century) witnessed the last great phase of Buddhism and of the Buddhist art in India. *The Buddhist monasteries (mahaviharas) of Nalanda, Odantapuri, Vikramsila and Somarupa were great centres of Buddhist learning and art.* A large number of manuscripts on palm-leaf relating to the Buddhist themes were written and illustrated with the images of Buddhist deities at these centres which also had workshops for the casting of bronze images. Students and pilgrims from all over South-East Asia gathered there for education and religious instruction. *They took back to their countries examples of Pala Buddhist art, in the form of bronzes and manuscripts which helped to carry the Pala style to Nepal, Tibet, Burma, Sri Lanka and Java etc.* The surviving examples of 32the Pala illustrated manuscripts mostly belong to the Vajrayana School of Buddhism.

The Pala painting is characterised by sinuous line and subdued tones of colour. *It is a naturalistic style which resembles the ideal forms of contemporary bronze and stone sculpture, and reflects some feeling of the classical art of Ajanta.* A fine example of the typical Buddhist palm-leaf manuscript illustrated in the Pala style exists in the Bodleian Library, Oxford, England. It is a manuscript of the *Astasahasrika Prajnaparamita*, or the perfection of Wisdom written in eight thousand lines. It was executed at the monastery of Nalanda in the fifteenth year of the reign of the Pala King, Ramapala, in the last quarter of the eleventh century. The manuscript has illustrations of six pages and also on the insides of both wooden covers.

The Pala art came to a sudden end after the destruction of the Buddhist monasteries at the hands of Muslim invaders in the first half of the 13th century. Some of the monks and artists escaped and fled to Nepal, which helped in reinforcing the existing art traditions there.

Did you know?

- The proto-Bangla language was born during the reign of the Palas. The Buddhist texts of the Charyapada were the earliest form of Bangla language. This language was used as the official language in Tibet, Myanmar, Java and Sumatra.
- The gigantic structures of Vikramshila Vihara, Odantapuri Vihara, and Jagaddala Vihara were masterpieces of the Palas.

The Pala Empire was an Indian imperial power, during the Classical period of India, that existed from 750–1174 CE. It was ruled by a Buddhist dynasty from Bengal in the eastern region of the Indian subcontinent, all the rulers bearing names ending with the suffix *Pala* (Modern Bengali), which means protector. The Palas were often described by opponents as the Lords of Gauda. The Palas were followers of the Mahayana and Tantric schools of Buddhism. Gopala was the first ruler from the dynasty. He came to power in 750 in Gaur by a democratic election. This event is recognized as one of the first democratic elections in South Asia since the time of the Mahā Janapadas. He reigned from 750–770 and consolidated his position by extending his control over all of Bengal. The Buddhist dynasty lasted for four centuries (750–1120 CE) and ushered in a period of stability and prosperity in Bengal. *They created many temples and works of art as well as supported the Universities of Nalanda and Vikramashila. Somapur Mahavihara built by Dharmapala is the greatest Buddhist Vihara in the Indian Subcontinent.*



Pala manuscript displayed at Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The Pala Empire can be considered as the golden era of Bengal. Never had the Bengali people reached such height of power and glory to that extent. *Palas were responsible for the introduction of Mahayana Buddhism in Tibet, Bhutan and Myanmar.* The Palas had extensive trade as well as influence in south-east Asia. This can be seen in the sculptures and architectural style of the Sailendra Empire (present-day Malaya, Java, Sumatra). The Pala Empire eventually disintegrated in the 12th century weakened by attacks of the Sena dynasty followed by the invasion of Bakhtiyar Khilji's Muslim armies.

Did you know?

- **The administration during Pala Period introduced feudal economy here trade declined and agro economy flourished. Also the minerals played a major role in uplifting the economy.**
- **Their basis of administration was monarchical and the social condition during the reign of this dynasty was very much peaceful. Pala rulers followed Buddhism as well as Hinduism.**

Activity:

Make your own manuscript (in your local language) in the given box with a painting in the centre.

Sources:

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<http://www.indianmirror.com/dynasty/paladynasty.html>