

Ruins of the Buddhist Vihara at Paharpur

Somapura Mahavihara in Paharpur, Naogaon, Bangladesh is among the best known Buddhist viharas in South Asia and is one of the most important archeological sites in the country. It is designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1985. Since then, a series of UNESCO missions has regularly visited the site and helped with the project. Moreover, the UN body also prepared a master plan, involving 5.6 million dollars.

The quadrangular structure consists of 177 cells and a traditional Buddhist stupa in the center. The rooms were used by the monks for accommodation and meditation. In addition to the large number of stupas and shrines of various sizes and shapes, terracotta plaques, stone sculptures, inscriptions, coins, ceramics etc. have been discovered.

The site houses the architectural remains of a vast Buddhist monastery, Somapura Mahavihara, covering 27 acres. It was an important intellectual centre for Buddhists, Jains and Hindus alike. The 21 acre (85,000 m²) complex has 177 cells, viharas, numerous stupas, temples and a number of other ancillary buildings. The outside walls with ornamental terracotta plaques still display the influence of these three religions.

The excavation at Paharpur, and the finding of seals bearing the inscription *Shri-Somapure-Shri-Dharmapaladeva-Mahavihariyarya-bhiksu-sangghasya*, has identified the Somapura Mahavihara as built by the second Pala king Dharmapala (circa 781-821) of Pala Dynasty. Some clay seals from the ruins bear the inscription Shri-Somapure-Shri-Dharmapaladeva-Mahavihariyarya-bhiksu-sangghasya. Tibetan sources, including Tibetan translations of *Dharmakayavidhi* and *Madhyamaka Ratnapradipa*, Taranatha's history and *Pag-Sam-Jon-Zang*, mention that Dharmapala's successor Devapala (circa 810—850) built it after his conquest of Varendra. The Paharpur pillar inscription bears the mention of 5th regnal year of Devapala's successor Mahendrapala (circa 850—854) along with the name of Bhiksu Ajayagarbha. Taranatha's *Pag Sam Jon Zang* records that the monastery was repaired and renovated during the reign of Mahipala (circa 995—1043 AD). Nalanda inscription of Vipulashrimitra records that the monastery was destroyed by fire, which also killed Vipulashrimitra's ancestor Karunashrimitra, during an conquest by the Vanga army in the 11th century, assumed to be an army of the Varman rulers. About a century later Vipulashrimitra renovated the vihara and added a temple of Tara. The restoration work was alluded as *jagatang netraika vishrama bhuh* (a singular feast to the eyes of the world). During the Sena rulers, known as *Karnatadeshatagata Brahmaksatriya*, in the second half of the 12th century the vihara started to decline for the last time, and was finally abandoned during the 13th century when the area came under Muslim occupation.

Atisha Dipankar Srijnan stayed here for many years and translated the *Madhyamaka Ratnapradipa* into Tibetan. Over time Atisha's spiritual preceptor, Ratnakara Shanti served as a sthavira of the vihara, Mahapanditacharya Bodhibhadra served as a resident monk, and several other scholars spent some part of their lives at this monastery including Kalamahapada, Viryendra and Karunashrimitra. Many Tibetan monks visited the Somapura between 9th and 12th centuries.

--Wikipedia [<http://www.wikipedia.org>]