

*Somapura Maha Vihara at Paharpur, Bangladesh*  
*A comparative study with Stupas in South and Southeast Asia*

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Somapura Maha Vihara at Paharpur in Bangladesh is one of the most important Buddhist sites in the World. It is the largest Buddhist monastery in Bengal if not in the Indian subcontinent. The magnificent size and the peculiar plan of the central monument of the monastery have drawn attention of many Archaeologists and some of them have done comprehensive studies on it. The present study is a comparison of the plan of this monument with somewhat similar structures in South and Southeast Asia in view of understanding the concept and origin of the plan and function of the monument which is still in ambiguity.

The Maha Vihara had been built by King Dharmapala (Circa 781-821 CE), the second king of the Pala dynasty and his successor King Devendra (Circa 810-850 CE) while it been repaired during the period of King Mahipala (Circa 995-1045 CE). The monastery was destroyed by fire in the 11th century during the invasion of the Vanga army and renovated after about a century by Vipulashrimitra with an addition of a temple for goddess Tara in to the monastery. The decline of the establishment began in the mid 12th Century CE and it has been totally deserted after the Muslim conquest of the region in the 13th Century CE.

The central monument of the Somapura Maha vihara is in 'Chaturmukha' or cruciform ground plan. It rises up as dwindling terraces and its superstructure has collapsed as to unidentified the shape of the structure. However, it has been surmised that the monument was a terraced or pyramidal shaped stupa which is rare in the South Asian region but popular in the Southeast Asia. It has been often compared with Chandi Loro Jongrang and Chandi Seru of Parambanan in Java and believed that the idea of the plan of the Maha Vihara has been influence by Southeast Asian temples than monuments of Indian sub continent.

The present study questions above assumption and show that there were somewhat similar Viharas in South Asia before the plan popularize in Southeast Asia. The relatively recently excavated Kesaria Stupa in Bihar clearly shows the Somapura Maha vihara is not an isolated example in South Asia. Further, The plans of Chaukandi Stupa at Sarnath, Nandangarh Stupa in Bihar, Amluk Dara in Swat Vally, Bhamala near Taxila can be considered as proto types of Somapura Maha Vihara at Paharpur. The Cruciform plan and terraced shape can be seen in some of the Viharas and Stupas in Sri Lanka and elements of the development of so called peculiar plan of the Somapura Maha Vihara can be understood in the South Asian context itself by studying these architectural elements with proper time scale. Finally, it may suggest that the idea of terraced or Pyramidal Stupa has gone from South Asia to Southeast Asia than that of vice versa.