



## Paharpur

# Gateway to Buddhist antiquity

THE biggest single and significant Buddhist vihara, south of the Himalayas, is Paharpur in Naogaon, near the border of Joypurhat. According to inscriptions, Paharpur, previously known as Somapura vihara, was built by the great Pala emperor Dharmapala (770-810).

This huge quadrangular monastery with 177 monastic cells enclosing the courtyard and numerous votive stupas, minor chapels, extensive ancillary buildings on 22 acres is dominated by a lofty pyramidal cruciform vihara in the centre.

The main monastery of Paharpur is cruciform in style, striking a new style of architecture introduced for the first time to ancient Asia.

The basement wall of the vihara is adorned with 63 exclusive stone images, most of them belong to the Brahmanical Pantheon. The rich variety of terracotta art of the vihara with approximately 2,100 unique pieces including 900 still in situ, has made it distinct, although the plaques may not have the finest quality or artistic excellence. They are rather crude and sim-

**Paharpur Buddhist Vihara epitomises the rise of Buddhism under Pala dynasty kings, who embraced and protected the Buddhist ideals. The successive kings established many Buddhist temples. The Paharpur Buddhist Vihara was built under the great Pala emperor Dharmapala. It is said that when Buddhism was the prevailing religion in the area, practising Buddhist monks gathered in their endeavours for enlightenment.**

ple.

Besides prominent deities of Mahayana Buddhist pantheon like Buddha, Bodhisattava, Padmapani, Manjusri, Tara, Abalokiteshor etc., prime Brahmanical deities like Siva,



Brahma, Vishnu and Ganesha have been shown with analogous respect.

Well-known stories from Panchatantra and Jataka and scenes from great epics like Mahabharata and Ramayana

are also portrayed. The simplicity of non-elite people, human and animal motifs, floral and geometric decoration and divine and semi-divine beings represents the social dynamics and prevailing folk art of Bengal.

Available epigraphic records have shown that cultural and social life of the Somapura vihara was closely linked with the Nalanda Mahavihara at Magadha.

In 1968, Paharpur has been

declared as National Cultural Heritage Property protected under the Antiquity Act 1968 (amended in 1976). In 1985, UNESCO has declared Paharpur Buddhist Vihara as World Heritage Site (WHS) [criteria: C (i) (ii) (vi)] under convention 1972.

"Evidence of the rise of Mahayana Buddhism in Bengal from the 7th century onwards, Somapura Mahavira, or the Great Monastery, was a renowned intellectual centre until the 12th century.

Its layout perfectly adapted to its religious function, the monastery-city represents a unique artistic achievement.

With its simple, harmonious lines and its profusion of carved decoration, it influenced Buddhist architecture as far away as Cambodia" -- as stated for justification of Paharpur's inclusion as WHS.

Story: SHAHIDA PERVIN

Photos: SYED ZAKIR HOSSAIN

## CONSERVATION

The definition and practices of restoration and conservation and the value of the heritage are subject to change and depend on the point of view of different institutes. According to the archaeologist and art historians working for UNESCO World Heritage Centre, any archaeological restoration and conservation should carry within the framework of scientific guidelines to keep the authenticity and integrity of the cultural property.

UNESCO and ICOMOS (International Council of Monuments and Sites) charters and other instruments emphasise, as part of authenticity concern, original plan, form, materials and engineering technology and history of archaeological transformation of the site including history of use, changes, repairs and conservation and restoration work.

Integrity concern means keeping all material, structural and decorative elements of the site without prejudice, age, condition or other factors.



## words of wisdom

Since the present is the extension of the past, a good knowledge of history and memory can give a clear understanding of what we are and what we can do in the contemporary world. The present is also transmitted to the future with all its wisdom filtered through time.

-- Shamsul Wares  
an architect

