



Odantapuri Mahavihara - An Important Buddhist Institution: A Historical Review

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ABSTRACT

The *Pala* dynasty has a long political history. The kings of this dynasty ruled for a total of four hundred years. However, *King Gopala* founded the *Pala* dynasty. The kings of this dynasty promoted Buddhism and education. They have provided patronage to Buddhism and education in various ways and have built numerous monasteries, universities, and other educational institutions. They've built those monasteries and patronised them. One such institution they created was the *Odantapuri Mahavihara*, or *Odantapuri University*. The *Pala* king *Gopala*, also known as *Dharmapala*, founded it. This *Mahavihara* was able to create a strong network with the five *viharas* of eastern India at that time. The five universities with which *Odantapuri* created a network included *Nalanda*, *Vikramshila*, *Sompur*, and *Jagaddal*. *Vikramshila Mahavihara* was known as the main monastery during that period. And the budget given to *Vikramshila* and *Odantapuri Viharas* was much higher than the budget of *Nalanda University*. As a result, just as *Nalanda* was struggling to survive in the 11th century, *Odantapuri* received extensive patronage



from the *Palas* and became an unrivalled institution. The article in question presents, with historical argument, the important role played by *OdantapuriMahavihara*, or *Odantapuri University*, in the spread of Buddhism and education in ancient India.

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1. Introduction

OdantapuriMahavihara, or the ancient university of *Odantapuri*, played an important role in the spread of education at that time. The role of this monastery in the propagation and spread of Buddhism, philosophy, and education is especially immense. This monastery's history has enriched present-day India's past. Not only that, this university played a crucial role in shaping global education history. This university served as a milestone in the spread of human knowledge at a time when the concept of universities had not even been established in the history of the world. During the reign of *Rampala*, a total of fifty teachers taught at the *Odantapuri University*. They were of the *Hinayana* and *Mahayana* schools. They all lived and taught together. At times, twelve thousand monks also lived there. Students from various countries used to come to study at this ancient university. After completing their education, they would return to their country. And they would leave behind sweet memories of their *Guru* and *Guru*. Upon their return, the country's people and their families would create an atmosphere of joy. It was with such joyful memories that the ancient *Odantapuri University* conducted its academic programs. However, the historic *OdantapuriMahavihara*, or *Odantapuri University* of ancient India, was ultimately destroyed by the *Turkish* ruler, King *Ikhtiyaruddin Muhammad bin BakhtiyarKhalji*, in the early 12th century. Therefore, in the article under discussion, it is presented with historical arguments that the *OdantapuriMahavihara*, or *Odantapuri University*, played an important role in the spread of Buddhism and education in ancient India.

2. Review of Literature

The works so far on the topic under discussion are: *PaliSahitye Nagar Vinnyas& Nagar parikalpana* (Karunananda, 1994) in the book, the author has discussed various topics of cities and rivers and archaeology from various texts of Buddhist philosophy. *Buddhist Civilization and Buddhist Achievement in DesheDeshe* (Barua, 2016), gives a brief description of the Buddhist traditions of

different countries. *Buddhist Art and Architecture* (Sarkar, 1997), the author presents a series of descriptions of Buddhist art and architecture. *An Archaeological History of Indian Buddhism* (Lars, 2015), the author has made a statement on Indian Archeology and Buddhism. *The Archaeological Buildings of Cumilla* (Begum, 2010) the author presents a brief description of the archaeological resources of Comilla district of modern Bangladesh in her book. So it appears that the article in question is a complete dissertation to my knowledge. The research paper has been written to fill that gap.

3. **Objectives of the Research**

The objectives of the research in question are: 1. To gain accurate knowledge about the location, naming, and founder of *OdantapuriVihara*; 2. To gain an idea about the brief history of *OdantapuriMahavihara*; 3. To gain knowledge about *OdantapuriMahavihara* and its legends; 4. To know properly about the influence of *OdantapuriVihara* on other *Viharas*; and 5. To highlight the history of the library and collapse of *OdantapuriVihara*.

4. **Research Methodology**

Research activities are mainly conducted in three approaches. One of them is the qualitative approach. Again, there are many methods within the qualitative approach. One of them is the historical approach. The research in question has been completed using historical methods. To conduct the research, theories and information have been collected and studied from Buddhism-related texts, books, Buddhist archaeology-related texts, essays, inscriptions, coin inscriptions, etc., and then analysed.

5. **Location, naming and founder of *OdantapuriVihara***

The *Odantapuri Monastery* is a historical Buddhist monastery in ancient India. This monastery is closely associated with Buddhist teachings, history, and tradition. However, this monastery has been known by various names. Simply put, the following names identify the *OdantapuriMonastery*. Namely: *Odantapur*, *Odantapura*, *Udantapur*, *Udantapura*, and *Udantapura*. It is also called *Odantapuri University*. However, Buddha divided ancient India into sixteen districts. Several districts, including *Magadha*, became quite prosperous and powerful. At that time, the education and culture of Buddhism had become prosperous. At that time, Buddhism continued to flourish through various types of establishments, including monasteries, *mahabhiharas*, *stupas*, *chaityas*, etc. One after another, the kings of the various dynasties of that time played the most important role in all these establishments. Among



them, the *Kushan* dynasty, the *Maurya* dynasty, the *Dev* dynasty, and the *Pala* dynasty are particularly notable. The kings of the *Pala* dynasty built most of the structures. In this case, leaving the *Maurya* dynasty behind is impossible. 'The king of the *Pala* dynasty first established the *Gopala Vihar*.¹ He reportedly founded the monastery in the 8th century AD. Again, there is a difference of opinion about the founder and the date of the establishment of this monastery. Some believe that the *Pala* king *Dharmapala Odantapuri* founded the monastery.² King *Dharmapala* is said to have reigned from 770 to 810 AD and is believed to have built the monastery during this period. The *Odantapuri Mahavihara* is located in *Patna*, in the modern-day state of *Bihar*, India. This *Odantapuri Mahavihara*, or ancient *Odantapuri University*, has enriched the ancient history of the state of *Bihar* and *Patna*.

6. Brief history of *Odantapuri Mahavihara*

Odantapuri Mahavihara, or *Odantapuri University*, is a historical institution of ancient India. This institution has enhanced the glory of ancient India as well as modern India. It has greatly increased the importance of Buddhist education in various countries of the world, including India. A long history underpins this development. *Taranath* is a famous historian of *Tibet*. He is known as *Taranath*. He states that King *Mahapala* supported five hundred monks. All these monks lived in the *Odantapuri Mahavihara*. He also built a monastery called *Urvash Vihara*. He built it mainly for the *Sendhasor Sendha-ba* disciples.³ Two powerful Buddhist sects, *Hinayana* and *Mahayana*, emerged in ancient India and still have an influence all over the world. This was also the case during the era of King *Rampala* of the *Pala* dynasty. This sect has been prevalent since then. It is known that about a thousand monks lived in the *Odantapuri Mahavihara* at that time. Additionally, it is known that approximately 12,000 monks would congregate there for special needs.⁴ *Sendha-pa Shrivakas* are called *Sammatiya*. The word comes from Sanskrit. And the Sanskrit root word is '*Saindhava*.' This word means a resident of *Sindh*. *Sammatiya* Buddhist monastery was dominant in *Sindh*. It is believed that such information can be found by searching the history of that time.⁵ *Sendhav Shrivaka* created a connection between the monks and the Mahavihara of *Buddhagaya*. Historian *Taranath* articulated this concept. He established the connection between these regions and *Singha Dwipa* (*Sri Lanka*), along with other areas.⁶ The kings of the *Pala* dynasty patronised Buddhism extensively. It wasn't only the *Pala* kings who patronised Buddhism. The kings of other dynasties also patronised Buddhism. Among the monasteries built by the *Pala* dynasty, the following are noteworthy: *Vikramshila University*, *Nalanda University*, *Sompur Mahavihara*, and *Jagaddal Vihara*.⁷ It is known that the Buddhist monasteries and the *Bihar*

institution's administrators maintained a connection. Scholars from *Bihar* maintained a connection during that period. During that period, they selected and appointed respected individuals from society and the country as heads of institutions.⁸ But one thing is critical: many of the Acharyas of this *OdantapuriVihara* were Bengalis. *Acharya Sri Gangaji* was a student of this *OdantapuriVihara*. The *Panchanan* River-side *OdantapuriMahavihara* held about twelve thousand people, according to various sources.

7. *Odantapuri Mahavihara and its legend*

World legends about ancient events and traditions are natural. The main reason for their existence is that there is limited historical evidence available. Consequently, people listen to such legends. This phenomenon has persisted for centuries, sometimes even hundreds of years, in various forms. Since the tradition of Buddhism has been going on for thousands of years, such incidents are considered a natural part of the evolution of these establishments. This natural process also applies to the *OdantapuriMahavihara* or *Odantapuri University*. Here are some examples: Historians *Taranath* and *Sumpa* have expressed the opinion that the *OdantapuriMahavihara* was built using gold. However, they assert that the discovery of the gold was a miraculous event. At that time, a *Tirthika Yogi* named *Narada* was present. His name was *Narada*. He was a *Tantric Yogi*. He had miraculous powers. He was searching for a partner who would be strong, brave, and truthful. At the same time, he will be skilled in the arts and sciences. He will perform the *shabsadhana*. That is, that person will help him in all the *sadhanas* and rituals with the dead body. It was quite difficult to find someone who met his exact standards. But he finally found someone who met his exact standards. He was a Buddhist devotee. Initially, this Buddhist devotee also resisted becoming a *Tirthika* devotee. But *Narada* was able to convince him. His success was due to his assurance of the community's support. And he also told him that he could use it to spread his religion. They tried to complete the ceremony, and finally it was successful. Trying to capture a corpse that protrudes its tongue would take one to three tries, *Narada* said. However, he divided each attempt into different levels of importance. For example, if you can catch it on the first try, he said, that would be the highest success. This is called a great achievement. And if you can catch it on the second try, that would be a medium-level success. Additionally, it would be a minor victory if you could catch it on the third attempt. If you failed to catch it after three attempts, the dead one would consume both of you. He also warned that the dead one would eventually devour the entire world if not caught. But unfortunately, the worshipper failed in his second attempt. Then the



worshipper went near the body and grabbed the tongue with his hand. And then a miracle happened. The tongue transformed into a sharp sword, and the body became gold. And when the worshipper grabbed the sword, he started flying in the sky. Then he flew to the peak of Semeru. At the same time, he circumambulated the four islands and the peninsula. The worshipper returned the sword to *Narada*. And the one who gave him the gold advised him not to use this gold for any immoral purpose. After such an incident, *Narada* flew into the sky. And *Unna Upasaka* made proper use of that gold. *He used that gold to build the OdantapuriMahavihara*. He even paid the artists who built the building with that gold. Simultaneously, the gold supported five hundred monks and five hundred worshippers. It is known that after *Unna's* death, no one could use that gold. So, before his death, he buried the remaining gold underground. And he prophesied that it would benefit all living beings. Then he dedicated the *OdantapuriMahavihara* to King *Devapala*. *Suppa Khan Po* thinks, 'The word *Odanta* in *Odantapurimeans* flying, soaring high.'⁹ It may have originated from the Sanskrit word '*udyanta*.'¹⁰ However, legend suggests that the construction of the *OdantapuriVihara* followed the model of the aforementioned incident. Another story is narrated in this way; here the story of the birth of *Dharmapala* and the story of the construction of the monastery, or *Vihara*, in *Odantapuri* are taken up. "The name of King *Gopal's* queen was *Dedda Devi*. And she was the daughter of a noble king."¹¹ She had no power over *Gopal*. That is why she asked a *Brahmin* for magical powers. The purpose was to keep her husband in power and protect her influence over him. Our society still reflects this trend in contemporary times. The Brahmin brought a medicine from the Himalayas and gave it to the queen's maid. The name of that medicine was Enchanted Medicine. The maid fell while the Brahmin was crossing a bridge. The current carried the medicine away into the sea. Suddenly, the *Naga* king caught it and swallowed it. With the power of the medicine, he became subject to the power of the queen and had intercourse with her. Their union resulted in the birth of a son named *Dharmapala*. One day, they performed a religious ceremony for *Dharmapala* at an auspicious moment. Then, a snake's head rose up in pride. At that time the king became angry. He decided to stop the conversation. However, a ring appeared before him. On it he saw the characteristic features of the *Nagas*. Then he asked him to continue the worship and devoted himself to its proper education. When *Dharmapala* grew up, he planned to build a temple. He consulted soothsayers about the temple's future. The soothsayers said, "Make a lamp." However, ascetics and Brahmins must assist in making the lamp. The king and the merchant should bring oil from their houses to light this lamp. Bring oil and clothes from the place of penance. Place the lamp in a suitable location. Place it in a location where the gods' guardians will be present. If the king made any request, *Dharmapala's* snake would throw the lamp. The king would have



to build the monastery where the lamp had fallen. However, someone had already lit the lamp. But suddenly a crow came from somewhere, took the lamp, and threw it into a lake. *Dharmapala* was very saddened by this incident. But that night, *Nagaraj* came to him. Then he said, "I am your father, and I will dry up this lake. You will build your temple in its place." You must perform the *yajna* for seven weeks to achieve this, and that's precisely what you did. The lake dried up on the twenty-first day, prompting the construction of the temple of *Odantapuri* in its place.¹²

8. Influence of *Odantapuri Vihara*

Some *Tibetan suttas* mention a monastery called *Samye* Monastery. It was the first monastery in *Tibet*. It was built in the 8th century. However, during construction, the *Odantapuri* Monastery served as a complete model.¹³

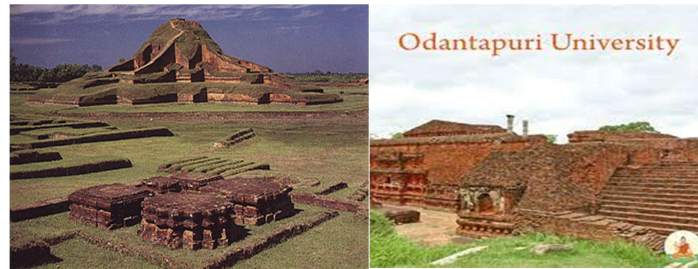
9. The library

Odantapuri Mahavihara, or *Odantapuri University*, had a rich library. People claim that its library was richer than that of *Nalanda Mahavihara* or *Nalanda University*. People claim that it possessed an extensive collection of Buddhist teachings and philosophy. It was not only a collection of Buddhist writings but also a rich collection of Brahmanical writings. *Ikhtiyar Muhammad bin Bakhtiyar Khalji* significantly contributed to the burning down of the monastery in the early 12th century AD. On his orders, the *Khalji* army burnt the monastery.¹⁴ The Buddhist and Hindu monks who survived the massacre fled to *Nepal* and *Tibet*.¹⁵

10. Destruction of *Odantapuri Vihara*

Just as *Nalanda Mahavihara* enriched the history of ancient India, similarly, *Odantapuri* has embodied Buddhist education and culture and has been able to make a significant contribution to its propagation and expansion throughout the world. This distinction is due to the fact that *Odantapuri University* holds a special place in the history of Buddhism, second only to *Nalanda University*. *Odantapuri University* is also the second largest in terms of size. Tragically, a *Turkish-Muslim* attack in the late 11th century destroyed this monastery.¹⁶ *Ikhtiyar Uddin Muhammad Bahtiyar Khalji* was the leader who organised this destruction. Despite the incorrectness of his ideas and suspicions, he remained steadfast. He thought that *Odantapuri Bihar* was a fort for the fighting soldiers. And from that fort on, the soldiers organised war

against them. He also thought that there were many weapons of war here. On the same suspicion, he destroyed numerous structures, including *Nalanda*, *Vikramshila*, *Sompur*, and *ShalbanVihar*.



*Odantapuri University*¹⁷ *Odantapuri Ruins, Bihar, Patna*¹⁸

11. Conclusion

In view of the above discussion, it can be said that there is no doubt that *OdantapuriMahavihara*, or *Odantapuri University*, is a historical university of ancient India. It was able to change the course of the education system throughout the history of the world. He played a critical role in spreading the teachings of Buddhism and philosophy in particular. The Pala kings' extreme patronage made everything possible. Otherwise, the establishment and management of the *OdantapuriMahavihara* would not have been possible. But despite all this, the institution that was built by one dynasty was destroyed by another dynasty, and nothing much remained. And the name of that dynasty was the Turks. They thought it was a fortress. One could conduct surprise wars from this location. However, the destruction disproved this theory. They reportedly converted *Odanthupuri* into their military headquarters after the destruction. However, the damage that had occurred was no longer visible. Today, we have recovered what remained and added it to the World Heritage List. However, this nation has drawn strength from its historical legacy. The world certainly still remembers *Odantapuri* in all its splendour. It has played an important role in the history of the world. The *Odantapuri University* is remembered forever in Buddhist philosophy and education. This is the hope of all of us in the 21st century.

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