

Vasu Vihara: An Examination of One of the Earliest Archaeological Sites

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ABSTRACT

Vasu Vihara is a historical and archaeological monument located in the *Bogra* district of the *Rajshahi* division of North Bengal, Bangladesh. It is believed to have been built during the reign of the *Pala* dynasty. And the *Pala* kings ruled from the 8th to the 12th century. The *Pala* kings were religious, and they were Buddhists. As a result, they built many such monasteries. *Dharmapala*, the second ruler of the *Pala* dynasty, ruled the monastery, as proven historically. The monastery flourished as a centre for learning and religious activities. Over time, it attracted Buddhist monks and ascetics from far and wide. Many scholars also came here. The monastery was active until the 12th century. Later, it fell into disuse. As a result, it was not usable for several centuries until it was rediscovered. The original excavations at *Vasu Vihara* were



carried out in the 19th century, based on legends and traveller accounts. However, archaeologists began systematic excavations of the monastery in the 1920s. The site is believed to have gained prominence due to extensive research by eminent archaeologist *K.N. Dixit*. The article discusses the importance of archaeological and religious tourism in *Vasu Vihara*.

1. Introduction

Vasu Vihara is a witness to historical events. *This Vihara has served a variety of purposes over the centuries*. Various local communities have been associated with it. However, these local communities have not themselves been associated with this *Vihara*. They have associated themselves with this monastery through the local inhabitants. It has witnessed the rise and fall of an empire. But it is also true that the monastery has stood the test of time amidst the spread of different religions in the region. It is also *important to note that the excavations of Vihara reveal that the site was not solely a religious centre*. It also conducted social activities. It was also conducting educational programs properly. The history of *Vihara* undoubtedly shows that there were numerous monks here. The teaching materials found here prove that teaching was one of the primary activities of *Vihara*. As a result, the historical importance of the monastery is immense. However, it is true that the monastery has undergone various restoration efforts and processes. The aim of these efforts and processes is to properly preserve and harmonise the historical significance of the monastery. *Vasu Vihara* still stands as an important archaeological site and is believed to have preserved Buddhist history and tradition. The article discusses the importance of Buddhist archaeological and religious tourism in *Vasu Vihara*.

2. **Review of Literature**

The works so far on the topic under discussion are: *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. *Pali Sahitye 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 Deshe Deshe* (Barua, 2016), gives a brief description of the Buddhist traditions of different countries. *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 article in question are: 1. To gain a correct idea about the location of *Vasu Vihara*, 2. To present an assessment of the excavations and resources found at *Vasu Vihara*; 3. To provide an idea of the religious tourist potential of *Vasu Vihara*.

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 method. The research 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. Brief introduction to *Vasu Vihara*

Vasu Vihara is located in *Shibganj* Upazila of *Bogra* District, Bangladesh. It is also known locally as *Narapati's Dhapa*. Archaeological excavations have uncovered two rectangular Buddhist monasteries and a cruciform temple dating back to the *Gupta* period.¹ The monastery is known to all, as it is located in the famous archaeological site of *Mahasthangarh*. It is located in the village of *Bihar*, six kilometers west of *Mahasthangarh*, on the west bank of the *Nagar* River. However, some books mention its distance as four kilometers.²



Picture: 1

Picture: 2

Picture: 3

Picture:1. *Vasu Vihara*, *Bogra*, Bangladesh.³ **Picture: 2.** View of the monastery of *Vasu Vihara*.⁴

Picture: 3. *Vasu Vihara*, *Narapati Dhapa*.⁵



The monastery is believed to have been built during the Pala dynasty because it was ruled by the famous *Pala* king *Dharmapala*. Therefore, it is believed that this monastery was built at the beginning of the nearly four hundred year rule of the *Pala* dynasty. At one time, this famous monastery was well known throughout India.

6. *Vasu Vihara* in terms of area

The size of the monastery is eight hundred feet long and seven hundred feet wide. The southern half is relatively high, and the surrounding area is flat, with five approximately equal *stupas*, approximately thirty-two or thirty-three feet high, and *Vihargrama* is identified as the ruins of the ancient 'Po-si-po' or present-day *Vasu Vihara*.⁶ Nonetheless, two monasteries stand side by side in this area. However, both the monasteries are quite small. They are long in the north-south direction. The northern monastery is one hundred and eighty-four by one hundred and sixty-two feet in size. It has thirty-one rooms. The other monastery is in the southwest direction. It is long in the east-west direction. Its area is one hundred by one hundred and fifty-two feet. It has a total of twenty-six rooms.⁷

7. *Vasu Vihara* from the perspective of period monuments

Vasu Vihara is known to be an ancient monument of the *Pala* dynasty. It is believed to have been built sometime in the mid-8th century. It is believed to have been built by one of the kings of the *Pala* era. It is primarily a Buddhist monastery. It is also locally known as '*Narapati's Dhapa*'. Over time, excavations have uncovered two rectangular Buddhist monasteries and a cruciform temple dating back to the post-*Gupta* period. Archaeological excavations have uncovered various valuable archaeological objects, including bronze Buddha statues and terracotta plaques.

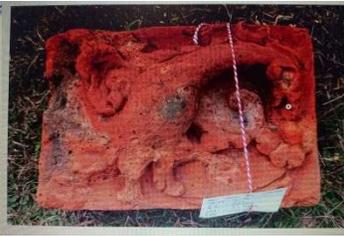
8. History of excavation work at *Vasu Vihara*

Under *Kashinath Narayan Dixit's* supervision, the Archaeological Survey of India initiated the first excavations in the financial year 1928-1929.⁸ Later, during the period 1973-1978, archaeological exploration and excavations gradually uncovered the ruins of two *Samgharāmas* and a temple at the present *Narapati Dhapa*. The excavations completely uncovered the ruins of *Vasu Vihara* after about twenty-three years.⁹ Former director of the Department of Archaeology and Museums of Bangladesh, Dr. *Nazim Uddin*, said, "Excavation work is still ongoing at *Vasu Vihara*, and it is hoped that this work will continue continuously for many more years." At this stage, it is not yet possible to judge exactly what Sir *Alexander Cunningham* identified, but the ruins of the monastery, which *Hiuen Tsang* mentioned as a

large and prosperous *Samgharāma*, and the temple of *Avalokiteshvara* may still be hidden in the soil. The two sanctuaries and temples discovered today are of a much later date. However, *Hiuen Tsang's* description of the original building at a settlement level much lower than these is not at all unusual.¹⁰



Picture: 1



Picture: 2



Picture: 3



Picture: 4



Picture: 5



Picture: 6



Picture: 7



Picture: 8

Description of the pictures:-

Picture: 1. Archaeological excavations are underway in *Vasu Vihara*, *Shibganj* Upazila, *Bogra*.¹²

Picture: 2. Burnt clay plaques and decorated bricks unearthed during excavations.¹³ **Picture: 3.** A

portrait of *Gautam Budha* unearthed during excavations.¹⁴ **Picture: 4.** Bricks unearthed during

archaeological excavations in *Vasu Vihara*.¹⁵ **Picture: 5.** Settlements, architectural structures, and

archaeological remains of an extinct civilization from the 6th to 7th centuries have been found.¹⁶ **Picture:**

6. A two-month-long archaeological excavation is underway in *Vasu Vihara* under the initiative of the



Department of Archaeology.¹⁷ **Picture: 7.** Archaeological excavations have uncovered two monasteries with 26 and 29 rooms, several temples, several small and large tombs, and various archaeological structures and settlements from the 10th and 11th centuries.¹⁸ **Picture: 8.** Bricks made of terracotta were found.¹⁹

It is believed that after complete excavation work, through the discovery of complete history, information, and theories, this ancient monastery will be discovered and its existence will be revealed to the public in the near future. This is a concise summary of the latest developments in the excavation efforts at *Vasu Vihara*. The Department of Archaeology has conducted a two-month-long archaeological excavation. This excavation took place from February to the end of March 2020. Here are some pictures of the archaeological excavation work at *Vasu Vihara*.¹¹

9. *Vasu Vihara* in terms of infrastructure

The first excavation of *Vasu Vihara*, also known as *Narapati's Dhapa*, was carried out in 1973-1974. The excavation lasted for two seasons. Several more excavations have been completed since then. All these excavations have uncovered the infrastructural aspects of *Vasu Vihara*, which include two medium-sized *Samgharāmas* and a large number of artefacts, such as the architectural structure of the temple. The small *Samgharāma* measures fifty-nine meters north-south and forty-six meters east-west. It has twenty-six rooms for monks on its four sides.²⁰ The rooms have a verandah that wraps around the front and an entrance in the middle of the east. The larger *Samgharāma* looks similar to the smaller one but is larger in size and number of rooms. It has a large open area. The small rooms inside served as living quarters for Buddhist monks. If you look closely, you will see that this large open area was an auditorium. The structure of the discovered temple has a square pavilion in the middle and a stepped circumambulation path around it.

The central temple, or *stupa*, was the focus of religious activity. It probably housed sacred relics and served as a place of worship. The design and construction techniques of the temple are of particular interest to historians and archaeologists. There are additional structures surrounding the main monastery. These include *stupas*, shrines, and other buildings. They suggest that *Vasu Vihara* was more than just a single monastery. Restoration work has helped preserve the architectural highlights of the site. However, time has erased much of the original structure. The current appearance of *Vasu Vihara* is the result of both ancient craftsmanship and modern conservation efforts.



10. Archaeological resources found in *Vasu Vihara*

Archaeological excavations have uncovered nearly eight hundred valuable artefacts, along with the discovered buildings. These include 40 statues of gods and goddesses, 86 small bronze statues, 34 terracotta pictorial tablets, more than 250 terracotta seals with short inscriptions, 90 elaborate bricks, valuable pebbles, and a considerable number of pottery fragments.²¹ In particular, the bronze statues of Buddhist gods and goddesses and the inscriptions in *Devanagari* script on the backs of some of them carry special significance. The exquisiteness and exquisite craftsmanship in the structure and arrangement of the statues, and the delicate and charming artistic creations have the power to attract the public's attention. In addition, other artefacts include knives, blades, and spearheads. Other items include semi-precious stone terracotta beads, terracotta figurines, balls, toy dolls, and playing discs.

10.1. Saṃgharāmas

The *Po-si-po Saṃgharāma* is situated four or more miles west of the six-mile-wide walled capital. The walled courtyard is bright and spacious. The high buildings and the elaborate exterior walls and courtyards are of a very high standard. The Chinese traveller *Hiuen Tsang* saw about three thousand Buddhist monks in twenty *Saṃgharāmas* during his visit to *Pundravardhana* in 638-39 AD. According to the description, '*Po-si-Po*' was a large *Saṃgharāma*, famous for its size, towers, and the height of its *Patamandapa*. Seven hundred Buddhist monks of the *Mahayana* school of thought resided in it.²²

10.2. Temple

The central temple is located one hundred and fifty feet away from the West *Vihar* building. The temple is semi-cruciform and rectangular with a roofed entrance. Its area is one hundred and twenty-five feet by eighty-seven and a half feet. Its entrance was on the north side. The sanctum was at the centre of the temple, and there was a circumambulation path all around. This temple is a centre for worship and prayer.²³

10.3. Sealmohara

The seals of *Vasu Vihara* are mostly shapeless. They have the name of the maker engraved on them. Only two very small square seals containing Buddhist hymns with 5 and 6 lines are found. They can be divided into several parts. Namely: 1. A square seal made of fired clay, one to one and a half inches in diameter, engraved with the Buddhist *Dharmachakra* and two lines of inscription. It is believed that these



are the original names of the monastery. Two dozen similar broken seals were recovered. But the names could not be read because the writings after the word '*Shri*' were damaged. A small seal was found, on which the *Dharmachakra* and deer were engraved along with a short script. 2. Most seals contain the name of the person. For example: *Jinarakshit*, *Dharmadeva*, etc. There are other names like *Prashant-Yas* and *Bhirudas*. These are surnames. 3. Seals containing religious hymns like *E Dharma Hitu Prabha* and mantras like *Siddhi* have different functions and are classified in a separate category. 4. There are a small number of seals that do not contain any anecdotes or inscriptions but rather symbols, vine leaves, or geometric designs. Some such seals have been found at *Vasu Vihara*, where the identity of the artist can be ascertained. However, the symbols or vine leaf designs along with the names of the individuals are noteworthy.²⁴

10.4. Description of Buddha relics

Traces of the arrival and stay of the Buddha after his enlightenment have been found in this monastery. A seal made of hard black clay found during excavations in the village of *Vasu Vihara* in Shibganj Upazila in the first week of December 2007 shows two deer standing facing each other on either side of a circle. According to history and legend, the first person to hear Gautama Buddha's message of non-violence after his enlightenment was a deer in the forest. And the philosophy of this wheel is reflected in the depth of compassion for people. Many philosophers consider this wheel a symbol of the Buddha's '*Hula of Law*'.²⁵

11. Theoretical discussion of *Vasu Vihara*

There are several theories about the use and significance of *Vasu Vihara*. Most agree that it was a monastic complex. It focused on religious and educational pursuits. The large number of cells indicates that it could accommodate many monks and students. Some interpretations suggest that *Vasu Vihara* was a centre for the translation and preservation of Buddhist texts. This theory is supported by the discovery of inscriptions and educational materials. The strategic location of the site facilitated the spread of Buddhism in Southeast Asia.

Mysteries still surround *Vasu Vihara*. For example, the exact nature of the rituals performed here is not fully understood. The purpose of some architectural features is a matter of debate among scholars. Historical records and archaeological finds have combined to piece together the site's past. Inscriptions have provided clues about the monastery's patrons and inhabitants. However, gaps in the historical record leave room for interpretation.



Dating of the site has been carried out using various methods, including stratigraphy and radiocarbon dating. The results have helped establish a timeline for the construction and use of *Vasu Vihara*.

12. *Vasu Vihara* through the eyes of Chinese traveller *Hiuen Tsang*

The Chinese traveller *Hiuen Tsang* observed numerous Buddhist monasteries in the ancient city of **Pundravardhana**²⁶ in the mid-7th century.²⁷ It can be further clarified that the Chinese traveller *Hiuen Tsang* visited *Vasu Vihara* during the reign of Emperor *Harshavardhana* from 639 to 645. He referred to *Vasu Vihara* as the *Po-si-po* of *Pundravardhana*. The architectural diversity of this monastery is fascinating, and the artefacts bear witness to the advanced social systems, environments, and industrial trends of ancient Bengal. He mentioned in his writings that there were seven hundred Buddhist monks or students there. Therefore, it can be said that the architecture of Buddhist art in the Indian subcontinent is not only a valuable example of history but also of the entire world's historical heritage.²⁸

13. *Vasu Vihara* as a religious tourism place

Vasu Vihara is an important archaeological heritage site from ancient Bengal. It bears witness to various histories and traditions from the 6th to 7th centuries. It has multidimensional importance in religious and social conditions. It contains a history of the rise and fall of civilisation. Over the course of time, *Vasu Vihara* has become a witness to the times and eras. The ruined *Vasu Vihara* has become an important tourist place along with its religious importance. As a result, many visitors from both within the country and abroad come here to explore. The Chinese traveller *Hiuen Tsang* came in the 6th to 7th centuries. The continuity of which still exists. Currently, *Vasu Vihara* has become known as one of the most popular tourist places.

13.1. Ways to get to *Vasu Vihara*

To travel from Dhaka to *Vasu Vihara*, you have to go to *Bogra* in various ways. For example, you can use a train, bus, and private car. Various buses to *Bogra* operate from *Gabtoli*, *Mohakhali*, *Shyamoli*, *Kalyanpur*, and *Abdullahpur* in Dhaka. The fare for AC and non-AC buses usually ranges from around 550 to 1300 taka. In addition, there are several trains from Dhaka *Kamalapur* to *Bogra*. Notable among them are the *Burimari* Express, the *Lalmoni* Express, and the *Rangpur* Express. Generally, the fare for the train varies from 475 to 1093 taka, depending on the class. After reaching *Bogra* City, travel 20 kilometres by CNG, an autorickshaw, and a battery-powered rickshaw.



13.2. Accommodation

There are several quality residential hotels in *Bogra* for overnight stays. Notable among them are *Mom Inn*, *Hotel Naz Garden*, *Parjatan Motel*, *Safeway Motel*, *Century Motel*, and *Motel Castle*.

13.3. Food Management

There are several good-quality restaurants in *Bogra City*. Their delicious food is available. Some of the notable restaurants are *Sathi Hotel and Restaurant*, *Mayer Doa Hotel*, *Athi Garden Restaurant*, *Chap Corner*, and *Hotel Safina*. However, it is worth mentioning here that the famous curd of Bangladesh is found only in *Bogra*. And a song has been written about the name of that curd. So, if you go to *Bogra*, you should definitely taste the curd.

14. Other attractions

If you have time after visiting *Vasu Vihara*, you can also visit other tourist attractions in *Bogra*, such as *Mahasthangarh*, *Kherua Mosque*, *Gokul Medh*, *Rani Bhabani's* ancestral home, and *Bhima Jungle*. Travel enthusiasts believe that the archaeological sites of *Bogra* can truly provide a great experience.

15. *Vasu Vihara* to earn foreign exchange

From ancient times to the present time, numerous people from within and outside the country have been visiting *Vasu Vihara*. As a result, it is now a religious tourism centre. It is associated with religious tourism. The world continues to practice this type of tourism extensively in the contemporary era. The current era is the age of information and technology. If this monastery can be promoted and presented to people all over the world in various ways, then people from different countries will come to visit here. Since tourists will come and stay in the country, Bangladesh will have the opportunity to earn a lot of foreign exchange from its tourism sector. As a result, sufficient facilities will have to be increased to attract tourists. And I believe that this responsibility should be carried out by the Department of Archaeology through the Bangladesh government. Therefore, it is believed that if this process is practiced, Bangladesh will have the opportunity to earn more foreign exchange from the tourism sector.

16. Conclusion

In light of the above discussion, it can be said that archaeological excavations conducted at the historic *Vasu Vihara* site in the *Bogra* district of North Bengal, modern Bangladesh, have revealed the existence of archaeological evidence of an extinct civilisation from the sixth, seventh, and eighth centuries.



Archaeological excavations of *Vasu Vihara* began in 1973-1974. The discovery was followed by subsequent excavations. Among the archaeological remains found during the excavations are two small sanctuaries and a temple. There are also settlement signs, architectural structures, terracotta depicting the portrait of Gautama Buddha, terracotta plaques depicting the portrait of a swan, precious stone beads, clay lamps, and decorated bricks. The ruins of the Buddhist *Samgharām* at *Vasu Vihara* indicate that it was once an important religious education centre for the Buddhist community. Today, it has become an important religious tourist spot in Bangladesh and the world. As a result, it would undoubtedly not be wrong to think of Bangladesh as a secular country in a modern world, although a kind of instability is currently being observed in the country. However, with the national election of a new government, the country is expected to regain its previous state of beauty. Therefore, one day, among the numerous archaeological treasures of Bangladesh, *Vasu Vihara* will move forward while preserving its religious significance. It will become one of the most popular tourist spots and centres for religious tourism.

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