

**The Uses of Buddhism in Colonial and Post-colonial India:  
Examining Contestation Around the Site of Bodh Gaya**

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Bodh Gaya is frequently characterized as the “Buddhist Jerusalem”, or similarly as the “navel of the earth”, for it is here that some 2550 years ago Siddhartha Gautama reached enlightenment beneath the shade of a pipal tree. Thus, Bodh Gaya is today among the most sacred spaces for the world’s Buddhist community, attracting hundreds of thousands of pilgrims each year. However, Bodh Gaya was never an exclusively Buddhist site. Rather, it remains a stigmatized and neglected fact that “Hindus have been visiting Bodhgaya since at least the Buddha’s own lifetime, and beginning in the fifteenth-century and extending into the twentieth, the site was actually maintained by a lineage of Saiva priests”.<sup>1</sup> For this reason, Bodh Gaya’s inscription as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2002 was viewed as a triumph for the site’s conservation, and for religious harmony in the region; it’s fate stands in stark contrast to that of another highly contested religious space— Ayodhya’s Babri Masjid.<sup>2</sup> Yet, to what extent has this designation really assuaged the competing claims of ownership between Buddhists and Hindus, and those between national and extra-national actors? I argue that because Bodh Gaya’s inscription as a World Heritage Site is based solely on its significance for the Buddhist community rather than its “nature as a dual-identity pilgrimage place”, World Heritage status has perpetuated and reified the colonial period’s Orientalist focus on Buddhist superiority.<sup>3</sup> I further argue that Bodh Gaya’s current World Heritage representation has been determined largely by government officials seeking to sustain a tourism economy around the site.

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, British archaeologists viewed the Hindu presence at Bodh Gaya as a desecration of a pure and authentic Buddhist past—a rhetoric steeped in the Orientalist discourse of loss and decay. This notion of a Buddhist golden age having preceded

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<sup>1</sup> Jacob N. Kinnard, “When is the Buddha not the Buddha? The Hindu/Buddhist Battle over Bodhgaya and Its Buddha Image,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 66.4 (1998): 817.

<sup>2</sup> This 16<sup>th</sup> century mosque was destroyed in 1992 by Hindu nationalists claiming that the mosque had been built on the birthplace of the god Rama.

<sup>3</sup> Kinnard, “The Hindu/Buddhist Battle,” 817.

the corrupt Hindu present ultimately served as a “legitimizing discourse about Britain’s civilizing mission in India”.<sup>4</sup> That is to say, in their positivist quest to objectively “know” India’s past through the Archaeological Survey of India, the British institutionalized a disproportionate valuation on the site’s Buddhist moment of origin. Such anti-Brahmanical ideologies would come to influence the international Buddhist campaign for control of Bodh Gaya, thereby catalyzing over a century of contestation regarding access and management. Indeed, these views persist into the modern day in the way Bodh Gaya is branded an exclusively Buddhist site by its World Heritage status, thereby obscuring contemporary understandings of Bodh Gaya as a site of living and “multivalent” tradition.<sup>5</sup>

#### ❖ **The British “Discovery” of Buddhism**

According to anthropologist Bernard Cohn, the British colonial project in India was enacted through the belief that Indian society was knowable and by extension that it could be categorized and harnessed to enhance administrative efficiency.<sup>6</sup> Among the many “investigative modalities” the British employed was the science of surveying, or the systematic collection of data concerning the natural and social features of the empire.<sup>7</sup> Out of this effort, amateur architectural and archaeological surveys were becoming increasingly common, such that by 1848, Alexander Cunningham began petitioning the government to establish an official archaeological survey.<sup>8</sup> This marked a significant epistemic shift in colonial knowledge

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<sup>4</sup> Bernard S. Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 5.

<sup>5</sup> Kinnard, “The Hindu/Buddhist Battle,” 817.

<sup>6</sup> Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge*, 4.

<sup>7</sup> Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge*, 5.

<sup>8</sup> Alan Trevithick, “British Archaeologists, Hindu Abbots, and Burmese Buddhists: The Mahabodhi Temple at Bodh Gaya, 1811-1877,” *Modern Asian Studies* 33.3 (1999): 643.

production from a reliance on texts to material remains as the best source to elucidate the historical truth of India's past.<sup>9</sup>

When in 1861 Governor-General Lord Canning finally established the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) with Cunningham as director, there was a growing Western fascination with India's Buddhist past. By the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the British had yet to realize Buddhism was distinct from Hinduism, largely due to the fact that many Hindus regard the Buddha as the ninth avatar of Vishnu. By the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century however, the difference between the two religions had become apparent through textual studies, and they were even regarded as "irreconcilably opposed".<sup>10</sup> Indeed, the Buddhist past was styled as the pure and authentic "antithesis to the 'degenerate' Brahmanical religion" of the present.<sup>11</sup> Victorians saw the Buddha as an ally in opposing Hinduism, "who dared to preach the perfect equality of all mankind...in spite of the menaces of the most powerful and arrogant priesthood in the world".<sup>12</sup> This "diminishing order of priorities" was further manifested in the galleries of Calcutta's India Museum, where the epochs of Ashoka and Gupta were presented as superior to the Brahmanical and "Muhamaddan" periods that followed. This view in turn was employed to legitimize Britain's colonial ambitions in India, and Cunningham himself felt that by uncovering a "counter- religious system of the past" he could facilitate the spread of Christianity in India.<sup>13</sup> Although he later abandoned such explicit imperialistic motivations, nevertheless the ASI's earliest projects focused on India's Buddhist past, for Cunningham's primary aim was to trace

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<sup>9</sup> Tapati Guha-Thakurta, "Archaeology and the Monument: An Embattled Site of History and Memory and Contemporary India," in *Monuments and Memory, Made and Unmade*, ed. Robert Nelson and Margaret Olin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 148.

<sup>10</sup> Kinnard, "The Hindu/Buddhist Battle," 831.

<sup>11</sup> Tapati Guha-Thakurta, "Monuments and Lost Histories: The Archaeological Imagination in Colonial India," in *Proof and Persuasion: Essays on Authority, Objectivity and Evidence*, ed. Suzanne L. Marchand and Elizabeth Lunbeck (New York: Brepols Publishers, 1997), 149.

<sup>12</sup> Kinnard, "The Hindu/Buddhist Battle," 825.

<sup>13</sup> Guha-Thakurta, "Monuments and Lost Histories," 149.

the itineraries of Chinese pilgrims from the 5<sup>th</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> centuries. Thus, instead of a wide-reaching and comprehensive survey, “he selected for investigation only those areas or places visited by Fa-Hien and Hiuen-Tsang and described by them as having ancient remains”.<sup>14</sup> Among these sites was Bodh Gaya, where fieldwork commenced in 1861.

### ❖ A History of Multivalence

The earliest extant representation of Bodh Gaya is a second century BCE panel depiction of the bodhi, or pipal tree under which Buddha achieved nirvana, and an inscription that reads “Enlightenment of the Blessed Sakyamuni”.<sup>15</sup> Thus, emphasis was placed first on the event rather than the place *per se*. Similarly, the travelogues of seventh century Chinese pilgrim Hiuen-Tsang place little emphasis on Bodh Gaya, although he does mention a *vihara*, or Buddhist monastery, of approximately 160 feet. This structure is known today as the Mahabodhi temple (a term coined by Cunningham in his 1892 monograph on the site), and it has been the central focus of modern contestation.<sup>16</sup> It is unclear however, how the temple came to replace the bodhi tree as the primary locus of religious reverence at Bodh Gaya. Nevertheless, the origins of the temple are attributed to the Mauryan emperor Ashoka during the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE.<sup>17</sup> Thereafter, the temple was repeatedly destroyed and rebuilt, and two inscriptions indicate that at least once it was rebuilt under the patronage of a wealthy Brahman.<sup>18</sup> Bodh Gaya reached its zenith in the late Buddhist period “under Pala and Sena rule, when it clearly stood as a thriving hub of royal patronage, artistic production, and pan-Asian Buddhist activity”.<sup>19</sup> After possibly being sacked

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<sup>14</sup> Dilip K. Chakrabarti, *A History of Indian Archaeology, from the Beginning to 1947* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1988), 58.

<sup>15</sup> Frederick M. Asher, “The Bodhgaya Temple: Whose Structure Is It?” *Religion and the Arts* 8.1 (2004): 61.

<sup>16</sup> Asher, “The Bodhgaya Temple,” 64.

<sup>17</sup> Guha-Thakurta, “Archaeology and the Monument,” 282.

<sup>18</sup> Asher, “The Bodhgaya Temple,” 64.

<sup>19</sup> Guha-Thakurta, “Archaeology and the Monument,” 282.

by the Muslim military commander Bakhtiyar Khalji in the late 12<sup>th</sup> century, Bodh Gaya saw little pilgrimage for the next several hundred years and ultimately fell into disrepair.<sup>20</sup>

Upon the arrival of Europeans, there were few Buddhists left in India and the site was under protection of the Shaiva mahant, or spiritual leader, of Bodh Gaya.<sup>21</sup> The mahants trace their lineage back to 1590, when Gosain Ghamandi Giri established a monastery at Bodh Gaya. As it is not historically uncommon that sites with a sacred background are reused by other faiths, the Shaivas probably found the site abandoned during the late 16<sup>th</sup> century and there established their residence.<sup>22</sup> In this way Buddhist ritual and imagery lived on, for although the Shaiva worshippers replaced some Buddhist symbols, many others were assimilated rather than destroyed. For instance, Hindus today propitiate their deceased ancestors at the bodhi tree, in addition to adopting and adapting images of the Buddha and Bodhisattvas.<sup>23</sup> Cunningham remarked on this religious syncretism during his 1861 inventory at the site, declaring that, “no conversion is required, as the people accept one of these votive stupas of the Buddhists as a ready-made lingam”.<sup>24</sup> While this view regards the Hindu laity as ignorant and lacking in agency, contemporary scholars refer to this process as the “Hindu mode of encompassment”—an inclusive approach in which Buddhist pilgrims were always accommodated as worshippers.<sup>25</sup>

Moreover, Cunningham’s reports are rife with derision at the site’s Hindu priesthood, largely due to the site’s state of ruin. Indeed, both the tree and the temple structures of Bodh

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<sup>20</sup> Asher, “The Bodhgaya Temple,” 65.

<sup>21</sup> Hinduism is comprised of four main sects, including Shaivism, Vaishnavism, Shaktism and Smartism. Followers of Shaivism revere the god Shiva, and are referred to either as “Shaivas”, “Saivas” or “Saivites”. Shaivism grew out of the Bhakti Movement, a devotional tradition in which personal relationships with god figure more prominently than ritual (Flood, 1996).

<sup>22</sup> Asher, “The Bodhgaya Temple,” 67.

<sup>23</sup> Asher, “The Bodhgaya Temple,” 69.

<sup>24</sup> The lingam is a pillar-like representation of the deity Shiva. Trevithick, “Mahabodhi Temple at Bodh Gaya,” 646.

<sup>25</sup> Trevithick, “Mahabodhi Temple at Bodh Gaya,” 637.

Gaya had deteriorated immensely—this was “no mere Oriental eye for decay”.<sup>26</sup> But Cunningham lamented how Buddhist art had rivaled that of Greece “until its degradation culminated in the wooden inanities and bestial obscenities of the Brahmanical temples”.<sup>27</sup> He further criticized the ignorance of the locals, who used the site’s stones as building materials, and in this way “the specter of ‘medieval ravage’ inevitably dovetailed with a more current scenario of ‘native apathy and neglect’”.<sup>28</sup> And thus we see once again “the recurrent narratives of authenticity and origin, whereby the true identity of a structure comes to rest on the recovery of a presumed primary moment of its coming into being”.<sup>29</sup> Despite this vitriol, few efforts were made to preserve Bodh Gaya, for at this time the purview of archaeology was limited to description and the collection of artifacts. However, this began to change upon the 1874 involvement of Burmese monks in the issue of temple restoration, which stimulated the government’s possessiveness over historical sites within its territory.

#### ❖ **The Transnational Buddhist Community: The 1874 Arrival of the Burmese Restoration Team**

“It is His Majesty’s wish to repair the enclosures of the Great Bodi tree, which from a long state of existence must have fallen into decay”, read King Mindon of Burma’s memorandum to the Government of India.<sup>30</sup> This overture was not a complete surprise to the Government, as there was a long history of Burmese involvement in the conservation of Bodh Gaya. Two prior missions, in which the site’s design was significantly altered, are dated uncertainly to 1100 and 1296. Furthermore, in 1811 surveyor Francis Hamilton-Buchanan was

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<sup>26</sup> Trevithick, “Mahabodhi Temple at Bodh Gaya,” 642.

<sup>27</sup> Kinnard, “The Hindu/Buddhist Battle,” 828.

<sup>28</sup> Guha-Thakurta, “Archaeology and the Monument,” 249.

<sup>29</sup> Guha-Thakurta, “Archaeology and the Monument,” 248.

<sup>30</sup> Trevithick, “Mahabodhi Temple at Bodh Gaya,” 648.

told that, “Burmese Buddhists ‘again’ were inquiring about the condition of the site”.<sup>31</sup> Thus, in keeping with its posture of religious neutrality the Government gave permission with the caveat not to “offend the prejudices of the Hindoos, who also possess shrines near the temple”.<sup>32</sup> To this end, the Governments of India and Bengal mediated between the mahants of Bodh Gaya and the Burmese monks, clarifying plans until an agreement was reached in 1875. The ground rules laid out by the mahants stated that no Hindu images be displaced, nor pilgrims disturbed, and that land for construction of a Burmese monastery be leased rather than sold.<sup>33</sup> Hence, work began in January of 1876 under the direction of the Burmese and there was little, if any, conflict between the restoration team and the Hindu worshippers.

However before six months had passed, the Government of Bengal became alarmed at reports that “Burmese workers were making a mess of the old temple at Buddha Gaya”.<sup>34</sup> As a result, renowned Bengali archaeologist Rajendralal Mitra was sent to monitor the restoration activities. His instructions were not to interfere, but to prevent as far as possible any irreparable damage to the temple. Yet to his dismay, Mitra discovered that the monks had used the foundations of ancient structures as building materials, and in the sanctum had plastered over niches meant for images. This was not problematic for the Burmese monks nor the mahants, largely because neither had any “interest whatsoever in archaeologically ‘discovering’ or ‘situating’ a Buddhism with which they were already familiar”.<sup>35</sup> Yet in his assessment, Mitra deemed the Burmese monks “ignorant of their true history and their faith”.<sup>36</sup> Thus, Mitra saw little value in “the practice of Burmese Buddhism as it was now actually encountered,” and

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Trevithick, “Mahabodhi Temple at Bodh Gaya,” 650.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Trevithick, “Mahabodhi Temple at Bodh Gaya,” 651.

<sup>36</sup> Trevithick, “Mahabodhi Temple at Bodh Gaya,” 650.



instead adhered to the Orientalist perspective that privileges the legitimacy of the moment of origin.<sup>37</sup> Ultimately however, Mitra lamented that the restoration “cannot be objected to”, for despite the Government’s obvious posture on the superiority of the Buddhist tradition, it ostensibly upheld a policy of religious neutrality.<sup>38</sup>

### ❖ **Anagarika Dharmapala and the Call for a Buddhist Mecca: 1891-1949**

While the Burmese monks had deferred to the authority of the mahants in their restoration project, Sri Lankan Buddhist leader Anagarika Dharmapala set out to directly challenge their sovereignty. Dharmapala is a contentious character, variously viewed as a “rabble rousing extremist” or “righteous defender of the true tradition”.<sup>39</sup> Born to a wealthy Sinhalese family and educated at a Christian mission school, he was influenced in his teens by the founders of the Theosophical Society, Henry Steele Olcott and Helena Petrova Blavatsky.<sup>40</sup> With them, he traveled across India endeavoring to revive the Buddhist religion in India. Eventually, he became disinterested in the Theosophical call for universal brotherhood and instead invested his energies in the plight of neglected Buddhist sites. Indeed, after a reading of Edwin Arnold’s poem *The Light of Asia* and his descriptions of the site’s state of decay, he devoted the rest of his life to the liberation of Bodh Gaya from the hands of its Shaiva occupants.

Meanwhile, Dharmapala grew increasingly alienated by Olcott’s conflation of Hinduism and Buddhism. Olcott argued that, “it was not only possible for the two religions to coexist in peace and harmony at Bodh Gaya, but it was natural for them to do so, because for Olcott,

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<sup>37</sup> Trevithick, “Mahabodhi Temple at Bodh Gaya,” 651.

<sup>38</sup> Trevithick, “Mahabodhi Temple at Bodh Gaya,” 650.

<sup>39</sup> Kinnard, “The Hindu/Buddhist Battle,” 820.

<sup>40</sup> The Theosophical Society is “an association founded at New York, 1875, by Col. H. S. Olcott, Madame Blavatsky, and W. Q. Judge, its professed objects being: 1. To form the nucleus of a universal brotherhood; 2. To promote the study of Aryan and other Eastern literature, religions, and sciences; 3. To investigate the unfamiliar laws of nature and the faculties latent in man” (Oxford English Dictionary, 2010).

Hinduism and Buddhism were in essence the same”.<sup>41</sup> Dharmapala however staunchly insisted that, “India by right belongs to Buddha”.<sup>42</sup> Thus, in 1891 Dharmapala established the Mahabodhi Society with the aim of restoring Bodh Gaya to its former state as a pilgrimage center for the world’s Buddhists. According to Dharmapala himself, “The idea of restoring the Buddhist Jerusalem into Buddhist hands originated with Sir Edwin Arnold...and since 1891 I have done all I could to make the Buddhists of all lands interested in the scheme of restoration”.<sup>43</sup> The rhetoric of the Mahabodhi Society however, was in line with the “anti- Brahmanical polemic” of Arnold and other British colonizers. He viewed himself as filling the need for “a powerful Buddhist’s eloquent voice...to show the knavery of the selfish bigoted Brahman priests”.<sup>44</sup> He regarded the Shaiva mahant as having “no religious interests at the shrine” but only financial interest in the land and its guesthouses.<sup>45</sup> In this way, Dharmapala perpetuated the “most egregious sort of Orientalist essentialism, [for] to him all Hindus could be reduced to an unambiguous image of the Other: namely the avaricious, duplicitous, and mercenary Mahant—the very epitome of the wily Brahmin”.<sup>46</sup>

In addition, he regarded the ritual activities that were taking place as a desecration of the Buddha, such as the painting and clothing of statues. More specifically, “whereas the Buddhists did not actually worship the Buddha image, at least not from Dharmapala’s enlightened perspective, but instead only paid it tribute, honoring the memory of the now-absent teacher, the Hindus turned the image into a god and thus into an idol perverting the Buddha and his image”.<sup>47</sup> This was not an indigenous debate, but “in significant ways actually created by the opinions of a

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<sup>41</sup> Kinnard, “The Hindu/Buddhist Battle,” 822.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Kinnard, “The Hindu/Buddhist Battle,” 821.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Kinnard, “The Hindu/Buddhist Battle,” 823.

<sup>46</sup> Kinnard, “The Hindu/Buddhist Battle,” 824.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

select group of Orientalists”, who viewed the syncretic tendencies of Hindus as evidence of ignorance and hence a charter for British rule.<sup>48</sup>

Thus in 1895, in “an open act of aggression aimed at Hinduism in general and at the Bodh Gaya Mahant and his followers in particular” Dharmapala and his followers attempted to install a Japanese image of Buddha in the inner sanctum of the Mahabodhi temple.<sup>49</sup> However, he was immediately thwarted by Bodh Gaya’s Shaiva Hindus. So too did the Magistrate of Gaya District, G. A. Grierson, affirm the Bodh Gaya mahant’s jurisdiction over the temple, which he deemed government property. Therefore, “although on the surface it may seem that he was simply trying to restore the image of the Buddha to its rightful place in the Mahabodhi temple, he was himself responding to, and at the same time perpetuating, a long-standing Orientalist conception of Hindu/Buddhist relations in which Hindus, through their idolatrous and fetishistic ritualizing, perverted the pure image of the Buddha”.<sup>50</sup>

#### ❖ The 1949 Compromise and Its Discontents

Although the initial response of the government was to mandate the removal of the Japanese Buddha, in 1896 they reversed this injunction. “In keeping with its code of religious neutrality, it justified its move in the name not of faith but of art”.<sup>51</sup> However, this marked a shift by the government from “a pose of neutrality to one of active intervention in favor of the Buddhists”, such that by 1903, the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, J.A. Bourdillon, took the stance that the temple undoubtedly should be returned to Buddhist control.<sup>52</sup> Thereafter, Lieutenant Governor Bourdillon established a commission in order to examine the Buddhist

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<sup>48</sup> Kinnard, “The Hindu/Buddhist Battle,” 818.

<sup>49</sup> Kinnard, “The Hindu/Buddhist Battle,” 822.

<sup>50</sup> Kinnard, “The Hindu/Buddhist Battle,” 820.

<sup>51</sup> Guha-Thakurta, “Archaeology and the Monument,” 294.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

claims to Bodh Gaya. Contrary to Dharmapala's stories of Hindus who "scowl and spit upon the image of the Buddha and throw stones at the temple", it was found that local Buddhist modes of worship often intersected with those of Hindus.<sup>53</sup> Moreover, the amicable relationship between the mahants and the Burmese Buddhists was held as a counter-example to the aberrant Sinhalese intolerance. Thus, it seems that Dharmapala's views did not speak for the world's Buddhist community, but instead were in keeping with European views of Bodh Gaya's "abominable" Hindu presence.<sup>54</sup> These findings were gathered in preparation for a court case that would drag on for decades, pitting "present possession of the structure on one hand [against] historical claim on the other".<sup>55</sup>

Ultimately, Lord Curzon decided that the temple "would be held in trust by the government, which would ensure its new status as 'an exclusively Buddhist shrine' and issue regulations to guarantee the 'proper conduct of Buddhist worship'".<sup>56</sup> The mahant was retained only as "ground landlord to draw the fees of all visitors, whether Hindu or Buddhist".<sup>57</sup> In 1904, the mahant successfully argued for the ouster of Dharmapala, and yet the Buddhist cause enjoyed significant popular support, even from Mahatma Gandhi. Several compromises were rejected until finally in 1949 the Bihar Legislative Assembly enacted the Bodh Gaya Temple Act. This law aims "to make provision for the better management of the Bodh Gaya temple and the properties appertaining thereto" through the offices of the Bodh Gaya Temple Management Committee, which still guides temple governance today.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Kinnard, "The Hindu/Buddhist Battle," 823.

<sup>54</sup> Kinnard, "The Hindu/Buddhist Battle," 825.

<sup>55</sup> Asher, "The Bodhgaya Temple," 69.

<sup>56</sup> Guha-Thakurta, "Archaeology and the Monument," 295.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Asher, "The Bodhgaya Temple," 69.

The Management Committee is comprised of eight members—four Hindus and four Indian Buddhists. This structure is meant to circumvent the influence of extra-national Buddhist actors like the Mahabodhi Society—a point to which I will return. More significant here are the issues raised by the Chairman, who is always the Magistrate of Gaya District, so long as he is a Hindu. In the case that he is not, the Government of Bihar nominates a sufficient replacement for the Committee. This arrangement effectively creates a Hindu majority within the Committee—an issue that is vehemently disputed by Indian converts to Buddhism. Largely from among the Dalits, this group has established the Buddhagaya Mahabodhi Vihar Liberation Action Committee, which petitions the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights to bring “justice to the Buddhists around the World by handing over entire control of the Management of the Mahabodhi Mahavihar to the Buddhists”.<sup>59</sup> It is likely that “some of the concerns may originate in a feeling of oppression by high-caste Hindus, for several of the points it raises implicate ‘Hindu Brahmins’ as culprits”.<sup>60</sup> However, the issue is more complex than the guarantee of a Hindu majority, for this was not the only purpose of the Chairperson rule. Rather, because the Committee was created in the aftermath of Partition, its structure reflects a fear of Muslim control of the temple. One local student recently remarked, “Look at what the Taliban did. They destroyed hundreds of Buddhas. What would a Muslim District Magistrate do here?”.<sup>61</sup> Given the fierce debate it continues to instigate, it is unlikely that the Committee’s structure will remain tenable. For this reason, the 1949 Bodh Gaya Temple Act is viewed largely as a temporary solution to deeper and persistent issues of religious discord.

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<sup>59</sup> Asher, “The Bodhgaya Temple,” 71.

<sup>60</sup> Asher, “The Bodhgaya Temple,” 70.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

### ❖ “Brand Buddhism” and World Heritage Designation: 1949- Today

As a result of these deficiencies in the Management Committee, UNESCO World Heritage status was enthusiastically received in 2002. It was the culmination of a long history of advocacy for a tourism economy, which was presciently suggested in 1902 by the pandit Haraprasad Shastri. He was of the opinion that Bodh Gaya should become the “Mecca of world Buddhism”, and a place of international prestige for India.<sup>62</sup> Thereafter, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, who served from 1947-1964, began to promote India as the “homeland of Eastern religion” in order to stimulate pilgrimage from neighboring Buddhist countries.<sup>63</sup> In fact, at the 2500<sup>th</sup> Buddha Jayanti celebration in 1956, Nehru invited these nations to establish their own respective religious institutions at Bodh Gaya. As a result, the surrounding farmland has gradually been replaced by monasteries, temples and guesthouses built by Sri Lanka, Burma, Japan, Bhutan, Mongolia, Viet Nam, Nepal and Thailand among others.

Accordingly, although the agricultural sector has diminished since the implementation of Nehru’s policies, the tourism economy has grown exponentially, with souvenir shops and hospitality services supporting the majority of local residents. Thus, despite Buddhists’ ostensible “minority position in terms of the management of the main shrine”, nevertheless they have successfully transformed Bodh Gaya into a “thriving centre of Buddhism”.<sup>64</sup> In fact, seeing the potential to attract international capital, state and central tourism authorities are deeply involved in this “vigorous marketing of ‘brand Buddhism’”.<sup>65</sup> As a justification, they often cite a development agenda that capitalizes on spiritual tourism in order to invigorate the stagnant Bihar economy. Thus, 2002 was a pivotal year, for not only was Gaya International Airport

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<sup>62</sup> Guha-Thakurta, “Archaeology and the Monument,” 296.

<sup>63</sup> David Geary, “Destination enlightenment: Branding Buddhism and spiritual tourism in Bodhgaya, Bihar.” *Anthropology Today* 24.3 (2008): 11.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Geary, “Destination enlightenment,” 12.

completed, but also Bodh Gaya was inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, having been nominated by the Ministry of Tourism and the Government of India.

UNESCO employs a set of ten criteria under which a site may be inscribed, five of which apply to Bodh Gaya (Appendices A & B). Each of these criteria makes reference either to Mahabodhi Temple's architectural, artistic, historical or religious significance as a Buddhist sacred space. The only mention of Hindu tradition in the site's official description is of a legacy long past, rather than a contemporary Hindu presence—"Opposite [the temple] is a memorial to a Hindu Mahant, who had lived on this site during the 15th and 16th centuries".<sup>66</sup> The same silence is true of the *Application for Inscription* written by the Ministry of Tourism and the Government of India.<sup>67</sup> Nevertheless, Bodh Gaya was touted as the "first living Buddhist monument" to be declared a World Heritage site (as distinct from a "dead monument" or "archaeological zone") in accordance with criterion VI.<sup>68</sup> Yet, criterion VI refers to sites "directly or tangibly associated with events or living traditions, with ideas, or with beliefs, with artistic and literary works of outstanding universal significance".<sup>69</sup> Today, there are just as many Hindus as Buddhists on pilgrimage" at Bodh Gaya, and yet the branding of the site as exclusively Buddhist from time immemorial effectively renders Hindu activity at Bodh Gaya

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<sup>66</sup> UNESCO. "Mahabodhi Temple Complex at Bodh Gaya." *UNESCO World Heritage Centre*, (2002). <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1056>.

<sup>67</sup> Government of India, Ministry of Tourism & Culture. *Application for the Inscription of the Mahabodhi Temple Complex as a World Heritage Site*. (2002)

<sup>68</sup> The first use of the term "living tradition" in association with Bodh Gaya can be traced back to the colonial government's Ancient Monuments Preservation Act of 1904. Interestingly, whereas for UNESCO "living tradition" is a criterion for conservation, the Act stipulated that its provisions did not apply to structures "still used for religious purpose", or "already the property of religious or other corporations". Trevithick, "Mahabodhi Temple at Bodh Gaya," 653.

<sup>69</sup> UNESCO. "The Criteria for Selection." *UNESCO World Heritage Centre*, (2004). <http://whc.unesco.org/en/criteria/>.

invisible. Thus, “Bodh Gaya has been transformed, rhetorically, at any rate, into precisely what Arnold and Dharmapala had envisioned—the Buddhist Mecca or Jerusalem”.<sup>70</sup>

In pursuit of maintaining this identity, the International Conclave on Buddhism and Spiritual Tourism was held in New Delhi in 2004. As a result of this conference, the Government of Bihar published a *City Development Plan* with the assistance of the Housing and Urban Development Corporation. This plan proposes a set of infrastructure developments, among them “a set of heritage policies that seeks to recreate Bodhgaya as a ‘world Buddhist centre’ that provides glimpses of the land of Enlightenment as it used to be in the times of the Buddha”.<sup>71</sup> Thus, city officials envision “a serene, verdant ambience, the conceptualization of which was done by the lord Buddha himself”.<sup>72</sup> However, the strategies devised in order to achieve this peaceful atmosphere sometimes stand in stark contrast to the development goals so often cited as a justification for the tourism industry.<sup>73</sup> For instance, the city has developed a zoning scheme in which a 2-kilometre buffer zone protects the “core” religious center. In this buffer zone, there are strict regulations regarding new construction, the height and aesthetics of all structures, noise and pollution, so as not to “disturb the historical and visual setting of the heritage site considerably”.<sup>74</sup> Moreover, Special Area B is “to be developed as a “cultural zone”, in which “only religious and related uses should be allowed”.<sup>75</sup> Thus, for the sake of constructing an authentic experience for tourists, the city of Bodh Gaya risks jeopardizing local livelihoods of those who live and work within the buffer zone.

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<sup>70</sup> Kinnard, “The Hindu/Buddhist Battle,” 834.

<sup>71</sup> Geary, “Destination enlightenment,” 13.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Nowhere is this more evident than in the proposal for an 18-hole golf course in order “not to attract elite”, but “to prevent other construction” and to “preserve more green areas”. Critics voice fears of spiritual degradation, as well as denial of the state’s drought and unemployment problems. Geary, “Destination enlightenment,” 12.

<sup>74</sup> Shri Ramesh Safaya, et al., Government of Bihar. Department of Urban Development. *City Development Plan for Bodhgaya under JNNURM*. (2006), 106.

<sup>75</sup> Safaya, *City Development Plan*, 107.



There is also evidence that foreign Buddhist groups flout these land regulations, as well as taxes, in order to build their own monasteries and guesthouses. This has created a growing friction between local merchants and foreign religious institutions, which are viewed as “being wealthy beneficiaries of foreign capital through transnational networks of donations and sponsorships”.<sup>76</sup> In addition, tensions have arisen between “local and foreign Buddhists concerning divergent ritual practices” and by extension conflicts have developed around ritual practices that are incongruous with conservation values, such as the painting of statues.<sup>77</sup> As local and extra-national actors compete for foreign capital, “spiritual cosmopolitanism, heritage tourism and local livelihoods” collide.<sup>78</sup> Thus, “dissidence and discord continue to simmer beneath an outer surface of order” provided by Bodh Gaya’s World Heritage status.<sup>79</sup>

## ❖ Conclusions

Therefore, in retracing contestation around the sanctity of Bodh Gaya, it is apparent that images are “inherently multivalent”, taking on “new roles and new meanings in response to the changing world around them”.<sup>80</sup> Although Mahabodhi temple was built by Buddhist rulers to commemorate the enlightenment of the Buddha, the site was soon occupied by Saivite Hindus. This fact however, was portrayed by colonial scholars as an assault on India’s glorious and pure Buddhist past, and hence served the colonial project’s legitimizing discourse of the “civilizing” mission. This resulted in a “museumizing process” that removed Bodh Gaya from the “immediate reality of its people and environment” and later informed transnational Buddhist

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<sup>76</sup> Geary, “Destination enlightenment,” 13.

<sup>77</sup> Guha-Thakurta, “Archaeology and the Monument,” 301-2.

<sup>78</sup> Geary, “Destination enlightenment,” 14.

<sup>79</sup> Guha-Thakurta, “Archaeology and the Monument,” 301.

<sup>80</sup> Kinnard, “The Hindu/Buddhist Battle,” 832.

campaigns for ownership.<sup>81</sup> The granting of UNESCO World Heritage status in 2002 was purported to have alleviated many of these tensions, and yet it is evident that the site is valued for its “moment of origin” in the Buddhist past, and by extension for its potential to stimulate tourism. In this way, the colonial marginalization of the “degenerate Hindu” finds its match in the neglected local resident of Gaya District today.

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<sup>81</sup> Guha-Thakurta, “Monuments and Lost Histories,” 157.

## Appendix A: UNESCO World Heritage Centre—Criteria for Selection<sup>i</sup>

To be included on the World Heritage List, sites must be of outstanding universal value and meet at least one out of ten selection criteria. These criteria are explained in the Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention, which besides the text of the Convention is the main working tool on World Heritage. The criteria are regularly revised by the Committee to reflect the evolution of the World Heritage concept itself.

Until the end of 2004, World Heritage sites were selected on the basis of six cultural and four natural criteria. With the adoption of the revised Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention, only one set of ten criteria exists.

### Selection criteria:

- i. to represent a masterpiece of human creative genius;
- ii. to exhibit an important interchange of human values, over a span of time or within a cultural area of the world, on developments in architecture or technology, monumental arts, town-planning or landscape design;
- iii. to bear a unique or at least exceptional testimony to a cultural tradition or to a civilization which is living or which has disappeared;
- iv. to be an outstanding example of a type of building, architectural or technological ensemble or landscape which illustrates (a) significant stage(s) in human history;
- v. to be an outstanding example of a traditional human settlement, land-use, or sea-use which is representative of a culture (or cultures), or human interaction with the environment especially when it has become vulnerable under the impact of irreversible change;
- vi. to be directly or tangibly associated with events or living traditions, with ideas, or with beliefs, with artistic and literary works of outstanding universal significance. (The Committee considers that this criterion should preferably be used in conjunction with other criteria);
- vii. to contain superlative natural phenomena or areas of exceptional natural beauty and aesthetic importance;
- viii. to be outstanding examples representing major stages of earth's history, including the record of life, significant on-going geological processes in the development of landforms, or significant geomorphic or physiographic features;
- ix. to be outstanding examples representing significant on-going ecological and biological

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<sup>i</sup> UNESCO. "The Criteria for Selection." *UNESCO World Heritage Centre*, (2004).  
<http://whc.unesco.org/en/criteria/>.

processes in the evolution and development of terrestrial, fresh water, coastal and marine ecosystems and communities of plants and animals;

- x. to contain the most important and significant natural habitats for in-situ conservation of biological diversity, including those containing threatened species of outstanding universal value from the point of view of science or conservation.

The protection, management, authenticity and integrity of properties are also important considerations.

Since 1992 significant interactions between people and the natural environment have been recognized as cultural landscapes.

### **Appendix B: Mahabodhi Temple at Bodh Gaya—Justification for Inscription<sup>ii</sup>**

Criterion (i): The grand 50m high Mahabodhi Temple of the 5th-6th centuries is of immense importance, being one of the earliest temple constructions existing in the Indian sub-continent. It is one of the few representations of the architectural genius of the Indian people in constructing fully developed brick temples in that era.

Criterion (ii): The Mahabodhi Temple, one of the few surviving examples of early brick structures in India, has had significant influence in the development of architecture over the centuries.

Criterion (iii): The site of the Mahabodhi Temple provides exceptional records for the events associated with the life of Buddha and subsequent worship, particularly since Emperor Asoka built the first temple, the balustrades, and the memorial column.

Criterion (iv): The present Temple is one of the earliest and most imposing structures built entirely in brick from the late Gupta period. The sculpted stone balustrades are an outstanding early example of sculptural reliefs in stone.

Criterion (vi): The Mahabodhi Temple Complex in Bodh Gaya has direct association with the life of the Lord Buddha, being the place where He attained the supreme and perfect insight.

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<sup>ii</sup> UNESCO, “Mahabodhi Temple Complex at Bodh Gaya.” *UNESCO World Heritage Centre*, (2002). <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1056>.

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