Destination enlightenment

Branding Buddhism and spiritual tourism in Bodhgaya, Bihar

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Fig. 1. The main entrance to the Mahabodhi Temple in Bodhgaya, Bihar. The temple complex was designated a UNESCO World Heritage monument on 27 June 2002.

In recent years India has been recast as an ‘emerging giant’ whose technological and economic growth is often seen as the Asian counterpoint to China’s hegemony in the region. One of the obstacles that has held back this entry onto the global economic stage has been the ill-fated state of Bihar in the the northeast Gangetic plains. For many years, Bihar has been notorious as a byword for poverty, backwardness and lawlessness often contrasted with the success of Kerala to the south.

Part of the irony of Bihar’s (inter)national identity is the rich cultural legacy that precedes what is today regarded as a state of degradation. The name Bihar derives from the Sanskrit word vihara, meaning ‘abode’ or ‘monastery’, and for for many centuries this region was a prosperous centre of culture and power which spawned some of the earliest empires in the Indian subcontinent. Not only is Bihar home to some of the oldest and most widely known centres of education in the subcontinent, it is also the birthplace of numerous religions, including Buddhism and Jainism. Thus Bihar’s ancient glory
provides a stark contrast with its dilapidated state today, but may also contain enormous potential in terms of India’s larger resurgence on the global stage. The imaginative currency of a glorified past is one that has stimulated the Hindu nationalist movement in India, but in the case of Bihar the provincial spiritual antiquity also resonates with some 375 million Buddhists around the world.

Nowhere is the concentration of world Buddhism more apparent than in the town of Bodhgaya in southern Bihar. Regarded as the ‘navel of the earth’ it was here that Siddhartha Guatama took refuge under the canopy of a large peepal tree and became enlightened some 2550 years ago. In addition to the vajrasana (or diamond throne) and ancestral bodhi tree that allegedly mark the location of Buddha’s enlightenment, the main attraction for most visitors today is the commanding Mahabodhi Temple. According to legend, the earliest construction of the Mahabodhi Temple can be traced back to the royal patronage of the Buddhist emperor Ashoka in 250 BCE. Over the course of many centuries, however, the temple underwent numerous repairs and renovations by different Buddhist groups before eventually falling into ruin around the 12th century. It was not until the late 19th century that the Mahabodhi Temple was substantially restored under the aegis of the new British colonial Archaeological Survey, at a time when Buddhism had been largely extinguished from the Indian subcontinent.

**Buddhist revival of the Mahabodhi Temple**

Previous scholarship on Bodhgaya has emphasized the politics of religious identity that have marked the Mahabodhi Temple’s recent past.¹ The temple was a site of contest and intense negotiations during the period of the British Raj and the nationalist movement, and matters were temporarily resolved through the establishment of the Bodhgaya
Temple Management Act in 1949, which remains the constitutional form through which
the temple is governed today. Seen as a compromise solution to the long-standing dispute
over rites of worship and ownership of the temple, the Temple committee set up under
the Act consists of a chairman, the District Magistrate of Gaya, and eight members (four
Hindu and four Buddhist), which in practice tips the balance of power toward Hindu
control.

Despite these divisive provisions, efforts were made under the first prime minister
of India, Jawarhalal Nehru, and the president Rajendra Prasad, to reconcile religious
differences and promote India as ‘the homeland of Eastern religion’ and stimulate
pilgrimage from neighbouring Buddhist countries. A pivotal event in this mid-century
nationalist context was the celebration of the 2500th Buddha Jayanti, held in 1956 to
commemorate the birth, enlightenment and parinirvana (or passing) of the great Indian
Tathagata. With large numbers of international dignitaries in attendance, Nehru invited
neighbouring Buddhist governments to establish their own respective religious
institutions in Bodhgaya.

**Fig. 2.** Buddhist pilgrims and devotees prostrate themselves and meditate before the
Mahabodhi Temple. Unlike other World Heritage sites in India and abroad, the
Mahabodhi Temple Complex is an example of a ‘living religious monument’.

Thereafter much of the agricultural land surrounding the main Mahabodhi Temple
was gradually replaced by clusters of foreign Buddhist monasteries, temples and
guesthouses that continue to serve as a refuge for pilgrims and visitors to this sacred
centre of religious memory. In Bodhgaya, for example, the number of Buddhist
institutions has exploded in the last few decades. There are now monasteries and temples
originating from Sri Lanka, Burma, Japan, Bhutan, Mongolia, Vietnam, Nepal, Thailand and many more. These transnational institutions from the religious diaspora have been active in transforming this marginalized rural area of southern Bihar into a thriving world centre of Buddhism, in spite of the religion’s minority position in terms of the management of the main shrine itself.

With the gradual increase of pilgrims over the last 50 years many locals have also begun to profit from this cultural capital by supporting the spiritual market through the production and sale of Buddhist souvenirs such as bodhi leaves, postcards, Mahabodhi miniatures and various sculptures. Some locals have actively learned the languages of foreign pilgrims to capitalize on specific pilgrimage flows. During the 1980s economic boom in Japan, for example, some of Bodhgaya’s residents saw an unprecedented amount of foreign currency in their pockets. This financial boon was in stark contrast to the impoverished agricultural economy on which Bodhgaya’s residents are largely dependent.

Many local men have also engaged in long-distance romance, and an unusually large number of successful hoteliers have married Japanese brides. Thus with the increasing influx of wealth generated through Buddhist pilgrimage, many local people are now embedded in the seasonal religious economy through the establishment of hospitality services and commercial ventures generated by the transnational channels of devotion. As a result of increasing competition for foreign capital, new frictions and social polarizations have emerged outside the walls of the main temple among local shopkeepers, merchants and hoteliers hostile to the activities of the foreign Buddhist monasteries. In particular, locals have challenged the administrative privileges granted to
these Buddhist institutions, seen to be running self-contained exclusive resorts and business centres while sidestepping commercial and electrical taxes by virtue of being registered as religious and charitable societies.

**Brand Buddhism and UNESCO World Heritage**

In recent years neoliberal agendas, transnational Buddhism, popular caste politics and Bihar ‘lawlessness’ have coalesced in the shade of the bodhi tree, producing an unlikely backdrop for acquiring a state of perfect peace and self-liberation. Today it is difficult to overlook the unusual character of the global bazaar that is also part of the changing landscape of this pilgrimage city. With the development of more rapid and convenient transport, ‘world-class accommodation’ and improved communications, Bodhgaya today is more accessible than ever. Catering to emancipation has also brought international cuisine to Bodhgaya, and on most days of the pilgrimage season one can enjoy fresh prawns flown directly from Bangkok and cooked in a Thai style. Seeing the potential of the Buddhist sites for attracting international capital, the state and central tourism authorities have been the latest actors to become involved in this global/local drama.

Through image-building and vigorous marketing of ‘brand Buddhism’, not only does the government seek to capitalize on spiritual tourism and push certain development agendas, it also sees Buddhism as a platform from which to boost the stagnant economy of Bihar.

**Fig. 3.** Although the Mahabodhi Temple is regarded as the ‘navel of the earth’ for the world Buddhist community, domestic tourists comprise the largest number of visitors to the site each year.

In 2002, Bodhgaya witnessed two landmark events that would have far reaching repercussions for the growing internationalization of the site and the development of
religious-based tourism. The first was the completion of Gaya International airport, bringing pilgrims directly from Bangkok, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Burma and Bhutan. This has been a major catalyst for increasing the number of pilgrims, who no longer have to brave the treacherous road from Patna or camp out at Gaya railway station until morning when the streets are free of bandits.

The other major event occurred on 27 June, when UNESCO declared the Mahabodhi Temple a World Heritage monument, after a five-year survey on the religious and historical importance of the site. The Mahabodhi Temple complex is the 18th Indian cultural site to be awarded the UNESCO designation since the World Heritage Convention in 1972. Lobbying for the UNESCO recognition was largely undertaken by the Ministry of Tourism and the Indian government, and by all accounts the Mahabodhi Temple met the criteria for a monument of ‘outstanding value to humanity’. News of the designation also brought fresh hope to the international Buddhist community, which anticipated that this prestigious global declaration would bring development and prosperity to the site. The UNESCO team recognized that the temple in Bodhgaya is the ‘first living Buddhist monument’ to be declared a World Heritage Site, thus distinguishing it from other heritage sites that are often regarded as ‘dead monuments’ or ‘archaeological zones’.

According to the secretary of the Bodhgaya Temple Management Committee, ‘UNESCO’s announcement has brought relief to the thousands of Buddhist monks and scholars as the temple’s upkeep would be in the hands of an international body’ (www.bodhgayanews.net 2006). However, when I interviewed a member of the UNESCO team who awarded the designation, he noted that ‘as with many sites in India,
the question of how it’s managed is sort of up in the air... The concern rather has been from the time it was placed on the World Heritage list, were the management instruments adequate to the challenge.\(^3\)

As a prelude to the official designation ceremony, an ‘International Conclave on Buddhism and Spiritual Tourism’ was held in New Delhi in 2004, inaugurated by the President of India and attended by the Dalai Lama. The conclave concluded its deliberations by adopting a resolution urging the Government of India to appoint a high-level commission to look into the situation of the ancient places of Buddhist interest in India and to recommend measures to rehabilitate and restore them to their former glory.

These demands for the conservation and rejuvenation of this sacred centre have resulted in the formulation of a comprehensive ‘City Development Plan’ (CDP)\(^4\) in consultation with the Housing and Urban Development Corporation (HUDCO) and the government of Bihar. The CDP in Bodhgaya is part of a major initiative launched by the Indian government, which has selected 63 cities throughout India under the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission scheme (JNNURM) and proposes to take on the entire gamut of city infrastructure development. Central to the development vision is 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.

The basic underlying conviction for the plan is that the city of Bodhgaya should have a serene, verdant ambience, the conceptualization of which was done by the lord Buddha himself when he said ‘Lovely, indeed, O Venerable one, is this spot of ground charming is the forest grove, pleasant is flowing river with sandy fords, and hard by is the village where I could obtain food. Suitable indeed is the place for spiritual exertion for those noble scions who desire to strive.’ The status of the Mahabodhi Temple as a World
Heritage site and the town as a sacred landscape should not get compromised in the process of development.

(CDP Final Report, 2006: 4-5)

One peculiar aspect of this development proposal that has been met with criticism from both locals and Buddhists is the plan for an 18-hole golf course. The proposal for a golf resort stretched over a 200-acre plot of land and incorporating two hotels was submitted by the UK-based Professional Golfers’ Association (PGA). When I interviewed the Secretariat of the Bihar Tourism Development Corporation about the rationale behind the golf course, given the site’s importance as a religious centre, the poverty of the surrounding region and the serious lack of water resources available, he replied:

The idea behind the golf course is to preserve more green areas. This will enable 200 acres to become green, but not only green alone, there will be two hotels and complexes that will be involved. There will also be golf cottages [...] and some guesthouses. We also want to bring more money into Bodhgaya. And we are sure the visitors from foreign Buddhist countries will use it. We want to enter Bodhgaya into the global market. This is not to attract elite but to keep Bodhgaya green. Otherwise there will be lots of construction. There is a new generation of Buddhists, so while those in South Korea are fading there is a revitalization in China. Japan also pays a lot of money for good infrastructure. So we see this as an opportunity to enter the international market. We also have envisioned floating a trophy for the ‘Gautama Annual Tournament’. People from all over will descend for a month to participate. So there are two reasons for the golf course, one is as an international market strategy and the other is to keep Bodhgaya green. The golf course will also bring 100-200 people employment. Horticulture can be improved, there can be lotus flower cultivation and usual hotel cleaning. So there is scope for much more employment.5

Despite the fear of spiritual degradation generated by these tourism development projects, the place of Buddha’s enlightenment continues to be an exhilarating site for many visitors. Many are drawn to the majestic chaos that spills out of the Mahabodhi Temple into the bazaar, where spiritual cosmopolitanism, heritage tourism and local livelihoods interact. At the same time, despite the initial kudos that came with
UNESCO’s World Heritage designation, many stakeholders have now become quite critical of the state’s development proposals and their long-term repercussions for conservation.

One of their concerns is the vulnerable identity and status of Buddhist minorities, who continue to invest this pilgrimage centre with great religious importance but feel their voice has become marginalized as a result of Buddhist sectarian interests and the prevailing management laws. Another likely consequence is that many local livelihoods will be jeopardized in the name of beautification, given the number of shops and villages within the 2-km buffer zone proposed in the City Development Plan. Part of the irony of UNESCO’s prestigious declaration is that most of the prominent committee members with political leverage are in fact local residents enmeshed in district-level politics, who are often accused of making lucrative financial gains from the temple’s spiritual capital.

Indirectly, many of the foreign Buddhist groups have also entered the ring of corruption, as they are forced to evade land regulations in order to acquire space for the construction of their own religious centres and guesthouses. These growing Buddhist establishments are also often accused of being wealthy beneficiaries of foreign capital through transnational networks of donations and sponsorship.

In my interviews with many of the head monks and Bhikkhus-in-charge of the monasteries, they often respond: ‘What are we to do? This is how things are done in Bihar.’ So while Bodhgaya and Bihar appear to be experiencing a renewal under India’s new global economic resurgence, it makes sense that the state and central tourism authorities should capitalize on its greatest religious export. Here at ‘Destination Enlightenment’, the commercial value of the site in terms of its tourism potential is
reshaping the religiosity of the site in creative ways, where the noble eightfold path and 18-hole golf courses find unexpected equivalence.7

**Fig. 4.** Buddhist pilgrimage souvenirs.

**Fig. 5.** Today tourism provides an alternative and indispensable source of income for many locals who no longer work in the agricultural sector.

**Fig. 6.** Directly outside the temple is a bustling bazaar where local residents and itinerant vendors sell Buddhist pilgrimage souvenirs and ritual items.

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2. Other historic sites with Buddhist significance on the UNESCO World Heritage list include Ajanta Caves (1983), Buddhist monuments at Sanchi (1989), and Ellora Caves (1983)


5. Interview with Bihar State Tourism Development Corporation, Patna. February 2006.

6. For more information on the various community responses and campaigns led by local stakeholders and NGOS around the proposed buffer zone, see www.bodhgayanews.net.

7. I want to thank Christopher Titmuss and the Bodhgaya Social Forum for bringing this analogy to my attention in February 2006.