

Archaeological remains of Phuket and Bodhgaya: A cultural study of India and Thailand

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Chapter 4

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The antiquity of Taradih Bodhgaya is shrouded in descurity. The site where Gauttama, the prince of the Sakya clan, attained supreme Wisdom (enlightenment or bodhi or Sam bodhi) and became Buddha, came to be known as Buddha-Gaya. The place was also known as Sambodhi in early period as is evident from the inscriptions of Asoka who visited this sacred site when he was anointed for ten years.

๓ The name of Taradih, Bodhgaya do not occur in the Vedas but is mentioned in later works like the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, the Samhita and the religious codes of Atri Vasistha and Yajnavalkya, Among the sacred sites in Gaya- Kshetra, as enumerated in the Gaya-Mahatmaya section of the Vayu-Purana is mentioned Dharmaranya which, as its name implies, constituted a jungle tract and may be identified, at least in part, with what the Buddhists call the forest of Uruvela or Uruvilva (Bodh-Gaya).¹ It represents a sanctified boundary inside which is enshrined the image of Dharmesvara or Buddha and the Bo-tree (Asvatha) of World-wide fame. The enshrinement of the image of the Buddha-Dharmesvara and the presence of the famous Bo-tree suffice to indicate that the Dharmaranya of the Gaya Mahatmya is at least in part, the sacred site, the precincts of the Bodhgaya temple representing the Jungle of Uruvela or Uruvilva of the Buddhist literature. And the Bodhidruma Asvatha of the Vayu-Purana is undoubtedly the famous Pipala tree at Bodhgaya at the foot of which lord Buddha attained enlightenment or Buddhahood.

๓ Magadha came into prominence in the sixth century B.C., and it included Patna, Gaya, Bodhgaya and parts of Hazaribagh. Bodhgaya formed a part of great political entity of Magadh, and from the time of Asoka, Bodhgaya came to acquire special significance. Asoka's love for Buddhism and Bodhi tree roused up jealousy and revengeful spirit in the heart of his second queen Tishyarakshita who had cut down the Bodhi tree. It is said that the tree was miraculously brought to life, the two Bharhut carvings represent the⁴ Bodhi tree and an Asokan pillar surmounted by an elephant². The Barabar and Nagarjuni Hill caves contain Mauryan Inscriptions and are dedicated to the Ajivikas by Asoka and his grand son⁵ Dasharatha. These caves are the earliest examples of cave architecture of Bihar. These caves are exevated in the hardest granite with infinite care, and the interior surface are lurnished like glass. The Sitamarhi caves are (Dist. Nawada) similar to that of Barabar caves and contains several sculptures. But the Sunga aculptures. But the Sunga aculptures at Bodhgaya have a place of lasting interest in the history of Indian Art.

๓ Kharavela of Kalinga took advantage of the fluid political situation of Magadha and invaded the area. He led an expedition into Gorthagiri (Barbar Hill) and defeated the king of Magadha. The Mitras appear to have been connected with Bodhgaya as their names appear on the stone railings of Bodhgaya. Whether the Mitras were connected with the Sungas or were independent ruling dynasties, it is difficult to say in the present state of our knowledge. We have the name of Kaushikputra Indragni Mitra, Brahmani Mitra and others. The name of Kurangi, wife of Indragni Mitra, has been inscribed as a donor of the fifteen of the Surviving pillars and the two coping pieces of the old stone railing. Her munificence was responsible for the erection of the old sand stone railing, the old diamond throne and Jewel walk shrine. The name of Sirima occurs with thar of Kurangi as a joint donor of two of the surviving coping pieces of the sand stone railing. Nagadevi, wife of Brahmani-Mitras also erected a Yaksa pillar. Bodhgaya formed a part of the Kushana Empire. According to Cunningham, Huvishka furnished funds, for the building of Mahabodhi.

๓ Under the Imperial Guptas, Bodhgaya attained prominence. In one of the inscriptions of Samudra Gupta (the so-called spurious Gaya copper plate was issued from Ayodhya), Gaya is mentioned as a Vishya³. It was an administrative headquarter under the Guptas. During his reign Mahanaman had installed an image of Lord Buddha with inscription and it was done with the permission of the king Samudragupta. Samudragupta is famous in the history of Gaya and Bodhgaya for the exchange of letters between him and Meghavarmana of Ceylon (c. 330 A.D.). The king of Ceylon had sent two monks and his brother to pay homage to the Vajrasana and also to visit the monastery built by Asoka when on their return they complained that they could not stay in confort. Meghavarmana decided to found a monastery at Bodhgaya.

๕ Meghavarmana dispatched a mission to Samudragupta with invaluable gifts and requested for permission to found a monastery at Bodhgaya. The permission was granted. However, a splendid convent known as Mahabodhi Sangharama was constructed to the north of the Bodhi tree. When Hiuen-Tsang visited this monastery in the seventh century A.D., it was occupied by a thousand monks of the Sthavira school of Mahayana sect.

๕ Dated sculptures of the Gupta period have been noticed from Gaya and two figures of Buddha, standing and the other sitting, from Bodhgaya are supposed to be earliest dated sculptures of the Gupta period (corresponding to A.D. 383) and stylistically belong to the Mathura school of Art of the earliest centuries. Thirteen inscriptions belonging to the period between A.D. 100 and 400 are set forth in a chronological order and these mark some distinct stages in the growth and development of the life of the Buddhist holy land. According to Fa Hien the three monasteries at Bodhgaya were surrounded by Jungles and the city was empty and desolate. Towards the last day of the days of the Gupta rule some of the Kumaramatyas seem to have asserted their independence as we find Kumaramatyah Maharaja Nandana issuing a land grant in Gaya district in his own right. The Maukharis were also ruling at Gaya and Bodhgaya as feudatories of the Guptas but they also asserted their independence.

๕ The Maukharis, exercised their suzerainty up to this Ksetra. Three Maukhari inscriptions in the Barabar and Nagarjuni Hills, in the Lomesh-Rishi and Gopika caves are important for the study of the contemporary history. These inscriptions supply us with the name of Yajna Varmana, Shardulavarmana and Anantavarmana. The latter installed the image of Krishna in the Barabar cave near Gaya. He also set up images of Bhutapati (Shira), Parvati (Devi) and Katyayani in Barabar and Nagarjuni Hill caves. One of these three inscriptions refers to a temple of Siddheswara which is still in situ on the Barabar peak. It seems that Maukhari's ruled over Gaya and Bodhgaya first as feudatories of the Guptas, and later as independent rulers.

๕ Whether the Buddha images seen by Fa Hien at Bodhgaya exist now or not are still a matter of conjecture. But there is one image which may be safely relegated to the later Kushana age or early Gupta age. In the opinion of Cunningham "The earliest figure of Buddha which has yet been found at Mahabodhi." It bears an inscription of four lines on its pedestal which is written in the Kushana style. The Sanskrit of its text is not entirely free from such Prakrit forms as Upasikaya, Achadhammasahaya, and mata-Pituna. The image was installed in Samvat 65 (143 A.D.). The work of installation was done by a Buddhist monk with the aid of a Buddhist lay woman named Achadhamma. Presently this statue is in Indian Museum at Calcutta. However the date of this Buddha image is placed in early Gupta or the post Kushana's period. At the time of Fa-Hien's visit the great temple at Bodhgaya had not then come into existence, and the sacred area with the growing shrines presented but a simple and decent show.

๕ Two and a half centuries later Hiuen-Tsang visited the place and left a vivid account of the holy site including its immediate and distant surroundings, which is at once full of details excelling in the wealth of variety verging almost on clumsiness. The picture presented by him is, for all practical purposes, the same as that which we can imagine to our selves with the aid of all that we may still see on the sacred area of the Bo-tree. The pilgrim says, "It is surrounded by brick-wall of considerable height, steep and strong. It is long from east to west and short from North to south. It is about 5000 (1500) paces round. Rare trees with their renowned flowers connect their shade and cast their shadows, the dedicate herb (Kush) and different herbs carpet the soil. The principal gate open to the east, opposite the Niranjana river. The southern gate adjoins a great flowery bank. The western side is blocked up and difficult of access. The northern gate opens into the great Samgharama, Within the surrounding wall the sacred traces touch one another in all directions. Here there are stopas in another place viharas (temples). The kings, princes and great personages throughout all Jumbudvipa (India) who have accepted the bequeathed teaching as handed down to them have erected monuments."

๕ Hiuen-tsang has left a vivid description of not only the high wall of stone, the old stone-railing encircling the Bo-tree and the Jewel-walk-shrine to the north of the Bo-tree, but also of the great temple at Bodhgaya. Among other notable objects noticed by the great Chinese pilgrim, the figures of two Mahayana deities, Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva and Maitreya Bodhisattva installed in the niches like chambers to the right and left of the outer gate of the Bodhgaya temple deserve special mention.

Phuket island has a long recorded history, and remains dating back to A.D. 1025 indicate that the island's present day name derives in meaning from the Tamil manikram, or crystal mountain. For most of history, however, it was known as Junk eylon, which with variations, is the name found on old maps. The name is thought to have its roots in Ptolemy's Geographia, written by the alexandrian geographer in the Third century A.D. He mentioned that in making a trip from souwannapum to the Malay Peninsula it was necessary to pass the cape of Jang Si Lang.

Phuket was a way station on the route between India and China where seafarers stopped to shelter. The island appears to have been part of the shivite empire that established itself on the Malay Peninsula during the first millennium A.D. later, as Muang Takua Talang, it was part of the Srivichai and Sri Tahn empires. Governed as the eleventh in a constellation of twelve cities, Phuket's emblem, by which it was known to others in those largely preliterate times, was the dog.

During the sukothai Period Phuket was associated with Takua Pa in what is now Phang-nga province, another area with vast tin reserves. The Dutch established a trading post during the Ayuthaya period in the 16th cent. The island's northern and central regions then were governed by the Thais,

and the southern and western parts were given over to the tin trade, a concession in the hands of foreigners⁹.

After Ayuthaya was sacked by the Burmese in 1767 there was a short interregnum in Thailand, ended by king Taksin, who drove out the Burmese and re-unified the country. The Burmese, however, were anxious to return to the offensive. They outfitted a fleet to raid the southern provinces, and carry off the population to slavery in Burma.

This led to Phuket's most memorable historic event. A passing sea captain, Francis Light, sent word that the Burmese were en route to attack. Forces in Phuket were assembled led by the two heroines, Kunying Jan, wife of Phuket's recently deceased governor, and her sister Mook, after a month's siege the Burmese were forced to depart on 13 March, 1785. Kunying Jan and her sister were credited with the successful defense.

In recognition King Rama I bestowed upon Kunying Jan the honorific *Taho Thep Kastrī*, a title of nobility usually reserved for royalty, by which she is known today. Her sister became *Thao Sri Sunthon*.

During the Nineteenth century Chinese immigrants arrived in such numbers to work for the tin mines that the ethnic character of the island's interior became predominantly Chinese, while the coastal settlements remained populated chiefly by Muslim fishermen.

In Rama V's reign, Phuket became the administrative center of a group of tin mining provinces called *Monton Phuket*, and in 1933, with the change in government from absolute monarchy to a parliamentary system, the island.

The Heroines Monument was erected in the middle of the city opposite Thailand National Museum on Highway 402. After the Burmese sacked Ayutthaya, then the capital of Siam, in 1767, King Taksin drove out the Burmese and re-unified the country. The Burmese were bad losers, and outfitted a fleet to attack the southern provinces and carry off the populations to slavery in Burma. The monument honors Kunying Jan and her sister Mook who were credited with organizing the successful defense of Phuket island against the Burmese invaders¹⁰. This became Phuket's most unforgettable historic event.

To acknowledge their bravery and leadership King Rama I conferred on Kunying Jan the honorific appellation *Thao Thep Kastrī* a title of nobility usually reserved for royalty, and her sister became *Thao Sri Sunthon*¹¹.

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Mahabodhi temple

According to the Jataka tale, when Buddha first came here (after checking out some rather frightening places), the *Papilla*, or Indian fig (*Bodhi*) was a massive tree. It stood at the centre of a mandala composed of a silver white sandy ridge, encircled by creepers and a grassy woodland with all the trees inclining towards the *Bo* tree that stood in the middle¹². Close by were the pure, glassy waters of the *Neranjara* river, with many pleasant bathing pools. When he sat down in front of it facing East, a long vista opened out to through an avenue of *Sale* trees to the glistening beach of the crystal *Neranjara*. Thus it was 2,500 years ago. Very beautiful. After he left, he never looked back, and never visited again. But he did recommend it as one of the four memorable places worth visiting for inspiration. Buddhists believe this is the navel of the universe, the *vajra seat*, where past and future Buddhas achieve the ultimate state. Still, no one seems to have taken any notice for around 250 years.

The Buddhist emperor *Asoka* went there after being in power for 10 years, and again 10 years later. This time, he set up a stone pillar with an elephant capital here, as well as similar pillars at *Lumbini*, *Sarnath* and *Kusinara*. (Birth first teaching and death spots). He also sent a branch of the still living tree to *Ceylon*, where it was successfully planted. This all happened around 250 BC. A good thing, as his queen got jealous of her emperor's devotion, and had the original tree destroyed. A new one was quickly planted. Another 150 to 300 years pass, then a couple of devoted women have some work done. One, an elderly matron who had been married to a local king was called *Kurangi*¹³.

To perpetuate the memory of her dead husband, she built an open pavilion, supported on stone pillars, surrounding the tree and the *vajra-asana*, or lion seat, the actual spot in front of the tree where the Buddha had sat. To the side, where Buddha had walked up and down for 7 days after achieving the sublime state, a *jewel walk* was constructed, a stone lotus petal for each of his footprints¹⁴. A sandstone throne was formed over the spot where he had sat, and a sandstone railing was built right around the whole construction as well. This gives us the 5 essential parts of the site, which can still be found (in an evolved form) today: tree, throne, jewel walk, temple and stone railing.

The current *Bodhi* tree, within a small enclosure that also houses the *vajra seat* (between the tree and the temple, directly above the monks, in behind

the fence).

The first of many Chinese pilgrims who thoughtfully took good notes (and left them behind for prosperity) arrived not long afterwards, around AC 400. (So already 900 years have passed since the Buddha was there, and the open pavilion has been standing maybe 400 years)¹⁵. Fa-hien records that there are now some statues of the Buddha in the open pavilion. He also notes that the whole area has become filled with monuments to specific instances in the Buddha's travels to and from the spot. There are also monasteries, filled with monks keeping strict vows. Sometime in the next 200 years, there is a very major change. When the next Chinese pilgrim (Hiuen-tsang) visits around AC 635, the Mahabodhi stupa, remarkably similar to what we see today, has appeared. He took accurate measurements, both here and at Nalanda, where there was a similar stupa/temple¹⁶. This means it was built around 1,500 years ago, or 1,000 years after Buddha had passed through. The most popular current theory (presented in the book) is that the temple was built by a Brahmin minister, acting on advice given him by Shiva. His brother (on the same advice) excavated the tank (lake) alongside, where Buddha had washed. Presumably these brother had the support of the local king. Shortly afterwards, King Puavarma (Ac 600-620) built a new 24 foot wall around the site, and planted another Bodhi tree in the time honored spot.

During Hiuen-tsang's visit, there were many other smaller temples, containing statues of the Buddha, and a very large monastery on the North side (where the mall and shops are now). This monastery had been built by the King of Ceylon (Shri Lanka), and had 6 courts, was three stories high, and surrounded by a 30 to 40 foot high wall. It had come about because of a pilgrimage by the king's brother, who had returned home most upset, with a permanent stutter. This was the result of the appalling manners displayed by the locals. His brother, the king, was not amused, and quickly took steps to make sure no foreign pilgrims in the future would be treated so inhospitably. Or at least not ones from Ceylon. The main temple had a different entrance.

There were 3 lofty halls interconnected, and 10 foot high silver statues, one on either side. It is not at all sure there were four miniature towers as seen today at the corners. These were put there by the British restorers. (More below) What is interesting, is that the original lion throne, jewel walk and stone rail and pavilion pillars had been all torn down to build this new temple. Some of the old foundations were found by British restorers under the foundations of the current temple. It must have been an amazing place. You could spend weeks on the local tour, following in the Buddha's footsteps, reliving the golden moments at your leisure, with delightful rest houses and monasteries at every hallowed spot. Not long after this, a Chinese official brought silk robes for the main image (AC 680 ish). During the 8th and 9th century, there was a slight decline. In the 10th century wealthy patrons sponsored new statues and shrines. In the 11th century, 2 Burmese missions came. In 1035, the Burmese plaque reckons the temple has been rebuilt three times already. During this time local kings also patronised zealous monks who wished to do repairs.

All through 12th and 13th century the Burmese were very active in sending teams to restore the temple, despite their own country being invaded by the Chinese. By 1305, they had completed the complete repair and restoration of all the walls, including the stucco facings, and side buttresses. A Tibetan monk visited around 1235 and found 300 Sinhalese monks in residence. By now the Muslim invaders have well and truly invaded India. 1232 was the year the Qutub Minar was built in Delhi. (If you don't know what means, Indian History is obviously a mystery you have yet to unravel) It is not clear when exactly Mahabodhi was sacked, but sometime during the 13th century. For the next (approximately) 350 years, it was abandoned, in ruins, ending some 1500 years of continuous occupation by practicing Buddhists. Around 1590, a wandering Hindu arrived and settled down on the river bank near the ruins, gathering disciples. A few generations later, the Muslim emperor in Delhi gave the successor vast amounts of property in the area, including a couple of local villages (the ruins weren't specifically mentioned).

The old temple was never actually converted to a Hindu shrine, although some extra buildings were established for Hindu worship. In 1811, the Burmese came back to work again, and the next year, 1812, sees the first visit of a European archaeologist. A few years later, the current leader of the Brahmins starts to claim the actual ruins as his. The Burmese came back again in 1874, with lots of gifts for the Govt. of India (English, by this time, Muslims and Hindus both beaten into submission), to encourage them to offer assistance to Buddhist pilgrims, and to pay for the restoration of the temple. The British asked the local Brahmin if this would be okay, and he raised no objections, so work got underway. General A Cunningham came to supervise, and his work is well covered in Root Institute's page on the history of the Mahabodhi stupa, where there are also great photos before and after showing how much destruction had been wrought. Mind you, if the stupa at Nalanda was identical, then Mahabodhi got off very lightly, as the Nalanda one was reduced to a pile of bricks, (photo) The good general was also there when the two current Bodhi trees were planted¹⁷.

In 1889 the work was finished, and a couple of years later a young man from Shrilanka visited: Anagarika Dharmapala. He was inspired, and formed the Maha Bodhi Society. He devoted the rest of his life to trying to get control of the temple restored to the world's Buddhists. He hated that the Hindus were desecrating the shrines, and carting away relics to use in private houses. His life long struggle makes heart-rendering reading, and he died without completing his task. Several times he was beaten, and spent a fortune in protracted legal battles¹⁸.

My own personal interpretation of this (lengthy) section of the book is that the British Colonial Government preferred to back a (local) Hindu, rather than handing over control to a group of (foreign) Buddhists. Especially as one of the biggest, most powerful groups of Buddhists was Japanese, and the British distrusted their motives. In other words, it was political, and very painful for the Buddhists.๕

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Finally, after independence, in 1949, an act of Parliament was passed covering how the temple complex was to be administered. This is still in effect today. There is a committee, of four Buddhists and four Hindus. They first met in 1953, and since then have done a great deal to upgrade the facilities. In keeping with many of the previous repair jobs, I noticed that the stucco repairs done in 1968 are already failing (reinforcing steel bursting out). In 1973 the Buddha Gaya temple Advisory Board was formed. This has 21 members, including representatives from Thailand, Laos, Burma, Sikkim, Cambodia, Bhutan and Ladhak. Nearby are a museum, a library, lots of new temples and guesthouses to suit every inclination๕

There is now a very nice marble walkway around the whole site, and an imitation Asokan railing / fence. The place is flood lit at night. The upper shrine is a sanctuary for silent meditation, open to all. Tibetan artists are busy painting gold on to all the images. The grounds are filled with wooden prostration boards where Tibetans, Europeans and Asians work out their sweaty routines in murmured harmony. Practitioners of every age and nationality wend their ways around the three different circumambulatory paths, or sit on the lawns and under the trees. Indian tourists are (almost) reduced to respectful silence. It is a place where any Buddhist feels at home.

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