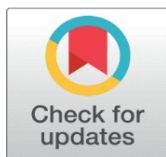
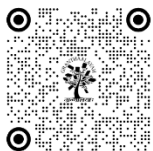


# THE CONFLICT OF BUDDHISM IN THE MAHABODHI TEMPLE

Sita Kumari <sup>1</sup>, Subhash Kumar Singh <sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Ph.D. scholar, Department of Buddhist Studies University of Delhi, India

<sup>2</sup> Department of Buddhist Studies, K.M.C. College, University of Delhi, India



DOI

[10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i1.2024.5683](https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i1.2024.5683)

**Funding:** This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

**Copyright:** © 2024 The Author(s). This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

With the license CC-BY, authors retain the copyright, allowing anyone to download, reuse, re-print, modify, distribute, and/or copy their contribution. The work must be properly attributed to its author.



## ABSTRACT

This paper explores the complex dynamics surrounding the Mahabodhi Temple in Bodh Gaya, offering an in-depth case study of how sacred spaces are negotiated, contested, and transformed in the modern era. Revered as the site where the Buddha attained enlightenment, Bodh Gaya serves not only as a vital pilgrimage destination for Buddhists worldwide but also as a contested religious and cultural landscape marked by historical shifts and contemporary challenges. The study traces the site's historical evolution - from its ancient origins under Emperor Ashoka, through periods of neglect and revival, to its current status as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Particular attention is given to the ongoing dispute over the administration of the Mahabodhi Temple, which is emblematic of broader tensions between Buddhist and Hindu communities. This conflict highlights issues of religious identity, historical ownership, and institutional power. Moreover, the paper examines the role of tourism and heritage management in shaping the experience and meaning of the site, revealing how economic interests and state policies influence the preservation and presentation of religious heritage. By providing an insider's perspective on the intricate interplay between faith, politics, and tourism, this study sheds light on how sacred spaces like Bodh Gaya are far from static. Instead, they are dynamic arenas where religious devotion, political agendas, identity politics, and commercial forces converge - sometimes harmoniously, but often in conflict - ultimately shaping their present significance and future trajectories.

**Keywords:** Buddhism, Mahabodhi Temple, Religious Politics, Pilgrimage, Heritage Tourism, Bodh Gaya, Sacred Space Conflict

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Bodh Gaya, a sacred site located in Bihar, India, is venerated as the place where Siddhartha Gautama-later known as the Buddha-attained Supreme Enlightenment (Sambodhi) while meditating under the Bodhi Tree. Today, the majestic Mahabodhi Temple stands on this very ground, symbolizing the culmination of the Buddha's spiritual journey and marking the final stage toward nirvana. For Buddhists worldwide, Bodh Gaya is not only a cornerstone of spiritual inspiration and pilgrimage but also a central symbol of their religious identity and heritage. At the same time, it has become a focal point for religious tourism, attracting millions of visitors each year from across the globe.

However, the contemporary significance of Bodh Gaya is deeply entangled with layers of political, social, and economic complexities. While it is a beacon of Buddhist devotion, it is also a contested space shaped by competing religious narratives, governmental interventions, and the growing forces of commercialization. These dynamics make Bodh Gaya an essential subject for critical analysis, especially in the context of how sacred spaces are transformed in a pluralistic and globalizing society.

As one of India's most prominent pilgrimage destinations, Bodh Gaya reflects both the radiant glories of Buddhist heritage and the enduring challenges faced in preserving its sanctity. The coexistence of sacred devotion and worldly influences creates a paradoxical landscape—one where spirituality and material interests, reverence and

commodification, tradition and modernity continually interact, and at times, collide. These tensions lead to contestation, seduction, and difference, but they also contribute to the evolving cultural and religious identity of the region.

In contemporary India, there is a growing emphasis on religious tourism as a catalyst for economic and cultural development. While this trend has undeniably enhanced the visibility of sacred sites like Bodh Gaya and provided support for infrastructural preservation, it often comes at the cost of historical authenticity and religious sensitivity. The commodification of spiritual spaces can result in the dilution of sacred meaning, and in many cases, exacerbate long-standing socio-religious conflicts. One of the most striking examples is the ongoing dispute between Hindu and Buddhist communities over the control and administration of the Mahabodhi Temple. This conflict has given rise to intense debates over rightful ownership, historical continuity, and religious representation, reflecting broader questions of identity politics, minority rights, and the politics of heritage in India.

This paper aims to explore these complex intersections by focusing on Bodh Gaya as a case study. By examining both historical developments and present-day realities, it offers an insider's perspective on how religious spaces are negotiated, contested, and transformed. Through this lens, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how sacred geography is shaped by faith, politics, and tourism—and how these forces together define the future of religious heritage in an increasingly interconnected and contested world.

## 2. PROBLEMS AND OBJECTIVES

- the paper explores contemporary challenges such as the ongoing dispute between Hindu and Buddhist communities over the control of the Mahabodhi Temple.
- This paper seeks to explore these complexities through a case study of Bodh Gaya.
- the study reveals how Bodh Gaya has been shaped by cycles of reverence, decline, and revival.

## 3. THE DISPUTE IN THE MAHABODHI TEMPLE

The Mahabodhi Temple, one of the most sacred and historically significant Buddhist pilgrimage sites in the world, stands as a powerful symbol of the Buddha's enlightenment. Its origins trace back to the 3rd century BCE, when Emperor Ashoka constructed the first temple at the site to commemorate the Buddha's attainment of Supreme Enlightenment under the Bodhi Tree. The current architectural structure, dating to the 5th or 6th century CE, represents a fusion of ancient Buddhist and Gupta-era artistic traditions. Over the centuries, the temple has experienced cycles of flourishing reverence, decline, destruction, and revival - reflecting broader political, religious, and cultural shifts in the region.

Historical records demonstrate that the site has long been a space of shared religious significance. As early as the Kushana period (1st–3rd century CE), Brahmanical Hindus were known to have participated in rituals at the site, including offering pindas (ritual food offerings) to the Buddha image and the sacred Bodhi Tree. The 7th-century travel account of the Chinese monk Xuanzang, as well as a 10th-century inscription found in Bodh Gaya, document the peaceful coexistence of Shaiva Brahman scholars and Buddhist monastics, who cohabited the religious landscape without significant conflict. During this era, Bodh Gaya was a multicultural and multireligious centre, reflecting the syncretic religious atmosphere of the time.

Even at the height of Buddhist influence in India, the temple remained open to Hindu worshippers. The Gaya Mahatmya section of the Vayu Purana, composed between the 13th and 14th centuries, underscores Bodh Gaya's integration into the Hindu sacred geography. It portrays the site as a tirtha (sacred place) where deities such as Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva are worshipped alongside the Buddha, who is honoured as Dharmeshvara ("Lord of Dharma"), and where the Bodhi Tree is venerated as an embodiment of the Hindu divine triad. Such representations further reinforced Bodh Gaya's dual significance for both Hindus and Buddhists.

However, the temple's inclusive religious history has not shielded it from conflict and contestation. In the late 12th and early 13th centuries, the Mahabodhi complex suffered a series of devastating invasions and looting by Turkish Muslim forces, leading to its abandonment and eventual deterioration. The once-thriving monastic infrastructure was left in ruins, and the continuity of Buddhist practice at the site was severely disrupted. Adding to this external pressure were internal doctrinal divisions within the Buddhist world—most notably, the growing friction between Sri Lankan Theravāda monks and Indian Mahāyāna practitioners. Theravāda reformers, particularly in the 18th and 19th centuries,

often criticized Mahāyāna ritual elements at the site as corruptions of the Buddha's original teachings, leading to further contention over religious authority and authenticity.

By the late 16th century, as Buddhism continued to wane in India, the temple had fallen into significant disrepair. It was during this period that Shaiva sannyasis - Hindu ascetics affiliated with the Shaiva tradition - took over the temple's administration. Such appropriations were not uncommon during that era, as the decline of Buddhism in India opened a vacuum in religious custodianship. These Shaiva mahants incorporated Hindu rituals and symbols into the temple's daily activities, while still allowing access to Buddhist pilgrims, particularly those arriving from Sri Lanka, Burma (Myanmar), and later, Tibet.

Over time, the authority of the Shaiva mahants was solidified through political recognition and land grants by various ruling powers, including the Mughal authorities and later the British colonial administration. The British, while officially promoting religious neutrality, codified the property rights of the mahants and formalized their administrative control through colonial legal mechanisms. This consolidation of Hindu authority over a profoundly Buddhist site sowed the seeds of modern contestation.

The dispute over the control of the Mahabodhi Temple has persisted into the present day and remains a potent symbol of broader religious and political tensions in contemporary India. The conflict underscores fundamental questions of religious ownership, historical continuity, and the rights of minority communities to reclaim and administer their sacred heritage. It also reflects the complexities of postcolonial identity formation, where religious sites become arenas for competing narratives of nationalism, authenticity, and spiritual legitimacy.

#### **4. COLONIAL INTERVENTIONS AND THE RISE OF THE TEMPLE DISPUTE**

The origins of the modern dispute over the Mahabodhi Temple can be traced to the colonial era, when British administrators and Orientalist scholars began to reframe South Asian religious traditions through the lens of Western categories and binaries. These scholars often portrayed Buddhism as a rational, ethical, and "philosophical" religion in contrast to what they perceived as the ritualism, idolatry, and superstition of Hinduism. This dichotomous framework contributed to a growing perception that Hindu elements present in the Mahabodhi Temple constituted a deviation from or even desecration of its authentic Buddhist sanctity.

A key figure in this reimagining of Buddhism was Sir Edwin Arnold, whose influential poem *The Light of Asia* (1879) introduced the life and teachings of the Buddha to a global, largely Western audience. Arnold's romanticized depiction of the Buddha as a noble reformer of Indian spiritual life helped spark renewed international interest in Buddhist heritage and sacred sites, particularly Bodh Gaya. His work played a pivotal role in shaping both Western and Asian Buddhist perceptions of the temple and laid the ideological groundwork for Buddhist revivalist efforts in the late 19th century.

Inspired by these narratives, Anagarika Dharmapala—a leading Sri Lankan Buddhist reformer and founder of the Maha Bodhi Society—launched a sustained and passionate campaign to reclaim the Mahabodhi Temple for exclusive Buddhist worship and administration. Viewing the Shaiva Hindu control of the temple as both a spiritual and historical injustice, Dharmapala traveled to India in the 1890s and began legal and political efforts to restore the site to the global Buddhist community. He regarded the temple not just as a sacred space but as a symbol of Buddhist identity, which had been suppressed under centuries of neglect, foreign domination, and now, continued marginalization under Hindu custodianship.

However, Dharmapala's mission faced significant obstacles. The existing legal and administrative frameworks established during the British Raj recognized the longstanding presence and authority of the Shaiva mahants, who had been managing the temple for centuries. When the dispute was brought to the courts, the Calcutta High Court ruled in favor of a compromise that allowed for shared Hindu-Buddhist worship. The judgment acknowledged the historical coexistence of both religious traditions at Bodh Gaya and resisted efforts to establish exclusive control by either party. This ruling not only marked a legal setback for Dharmapala but also underscored the complexity of disentangling centuries of religious intermingling and overlapping sacred claims.

Despite this legal defeat, the movement initiated by Dharmapala significantly influenced the broader Buddhist revival across Asia. It galvanized Buddhists in Sri Lanka, Burma, Japan, and later Tibet, many of whom viewed Bodh Gaya as a unifying spiritual center and a symbol of Buddhist resistance to historical erasure. In this way, colonial

interventions—while initially acting as a catalyst for the dispute—also contributed to the global reawakening of Buddhist identity, prompting international calls for justice and recognition at Bodh Gaya.

The legacy of colonial interpretations and legal decisions continues to shape the discourse around the Mahabodhi Temple to this day. The British-era framework for managing religious sites—founded on legal pluralism and an ostensibly neutral stance—effectively institutionalized the status quo and laid the foundation for enduring contestations. The colonial state's role in codifying Hindu authority at a fundamentally Buddhist site remains one of the most contentious aspects of the modern temple dispute.

## **5. POST-INDEPENDENCE DEVELOPMENTS AND THE 1949 MAHABODHI TEMPLE MANAGEMENT ACT**

Following India's independence in 1947, the newly formed democratic government of Bihar assumed responsibility for safeguarding and managing key religious and historical sites within the state, including the Mahabodhi Temple at Bodh Gaya. This transition marked a significant moment in the temple's administrative history, as it shifted from hereditary custodianship under the Shaiva mahants to a state-supervised institutional framework. In 1949, the Bihar government enacted the Bodh Gaya Temple Management Act, a legislative attempt to formalize and regulate the governance of the temple.

While the Act officially ended the exclusive control of the Shaiva mahant over the Mahabodhi Temple, it simultaneously instituted a power-sharing arrangement that remained deeply contentious. The legislation established a nine-member temple management committee, comprising a chairman, four representatives from the Buddhist community, and four from the Hindu community, one of whom would be the Mahant of Bodh Gaya. Although this appeared to reflect a balanced model of interreligious administration, several of its stipulations embedded structural inequalities that have since provoked ongoing criticism and legal challenges.

Most notably, Section 3 of the Act mandated that the Mahant—a Shaivite Hindu—must hold a permanent position on the committee, and that in the event of his inability to serve, only another Hindu could assume his responsibilities. Furthermore, the Act required that the District Magistrate of Gaya, who would serve as the ex-officio chairman of the committee, must be a Hindu. In cases where the serving District Magistrate happened to be non-Hindu, the Act instructed the state government to appoint another Hindu officer to serve in that capacity. These religious prerequisites for leadership positions have been widely criticized by Buddhist leaders and legal scholars as discriminatory and inconsistent with India's constitutional commitment to secularism and religious equality.

Over the decades, particularly during the 1990s, Buddhist activists and organizations—including the Maha Bodhi Society—intensified their demands for complete Buddhist control over the temple's administration. They argue that as the Mahabodhi Temple is the most sacred site in the Buddhist world, it should be overseen entirely by Buddhists, without interference or shared control with adherents of another religion. These demands highlight deeper concerns about the marginalization of Buddhism within its birthplace and the broader issue of minority religious rights in India.

Conversely, Hindu nationalist groups have consistently opposed any move to exclude Hindus from the temple's management. They maintain that Hindu reverence for the Buddha—as an avatar of Vishnu—legitimizes their continued role in the site's administration. This theological framing has further politicized the dispute, embedding it within the larger debate over national identity, religious heritage, and communal representation.

In the mid-1990s, an attempt was made by Bihar's then Chief Minister, Lalu Prasad Yadav, to amend the 1949 Act in order to increase Buddhist representation and grant greater administrative autonomy. However, the proposal triggered strong backlash from both Hindu and Buddhist communities. While Buddhists argued that the proposed changes did not go far enough in transferring control, many Hindu factions viewed the amendment as an affront to their historical and spiritual connection to the site.

In a strategic move to diffuse the tension, Lalu Yadav appointed prominent voices from both sides of the conflict to the temple's management committee, hoping to balance representation and ensure stability. However, this political compromise failed to address the structural roots of the dispute, which remain unresolved to this day. The Act continues to serve as both a symbol and a source of contention, reflecting the broader challenges of managing sacred spaces in a multi-religious, democratic society where the legacies of history, law, and identity remain deeply intertwined.

## 6. ATTEMPTS AT RESOLUTION AND THE 2013 AMENDMENT

Efforts to resolve the longstanding dispute over the Mahabodhi Temple's governance have continued intermittently since independence, often shaped by changing political leadership and shifting socio-religious dynamics. During his tenure as Governor of Bihar, R.S. Gavai, himself a follower of Ambedkarite Buddhism, along with Acharya Kishore Kunal, then Chairman of the Bihar State Board of Religious Trusts, proposed a significant reform aimed at enhancing Buddhist representation within the temple's administrative structure. According to their proposed formula, the post of Secretary of the Bodh Gaya Temple Management Committee (BTMC) would be reserved for a Buddhist, while the Chairmanship would remain with the District Magistrate of Gaya, irrespective of religious affiliation.

This initiative was widely welcomed by sections of the Buddhist community and was viewed as a practical compromise that could incrementally shift the balance of power within the temple's governance. However, the plan was abruptly shelved following Governor Gavai's premature transfer from Bihar to Kerala, illustrating the fragility of reform efforts that rely heavily on individual political actors rather than institutional consensus.

In the years that followed, the National Commission for Minorities (NCM) also took up the issue and recommended structural adjustments to the BTMC. The Commission suggested that the committee's composition should be revised to include a majority of Buddhist members, proposing a ratio of five Buddhists to four Hindus. This recommendation aimed to reflect the overwhelmingly Buddhist identity of the Mahabodhi Temple while still maintaining the principle of joint management. However, this recommendation remained unimplemented, largely due to political inertia and the fear of backlash from Hindu nationalist groups.

A more tangible, albeit limited, reform came in 2013, when the Nitish Kumar-led Bihar government introduced the Bodh Gaya Temple (Amendment) Act. This amendment removed the requirement that the District Magistrate of Gaya must be a Hindu in order to serve as the BTMC chairman. By making the chairman's post religiously neutral, the amendment aligned more closely with constitutional secularism and opened the possibility of Buddhist leadership in practice, if not yet in structure.

Despite this symbolic breakthrough, many Buddhist organizations criticized the amendment as cosmetic rather than substantive. They argue that the core of the problem—the entrenched Hindu majority within the committee and the mandatory inclusion of the Mahant—remains unaddressed. Moreover, Buddhist groups allege that successive governments have lacked the political will to confront influential religious and nationalist lobbies, thereby perpetuating an unjust status quo. For many, the 2013 amendment, though well-intentioned, falls short of addressing the deeper issue of religious autonomy, minority rights, and historical redress.

## 7. CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE AND UNESCO RECOGNITION

The contemporary significance of the Mahabodhi Temple extends beyond its religious function, making it a focal point of national and global attention. In 2002, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) designated the Mahabodhi Temple as a World Heritage Site, recognizing it as one of the oldest and most architecturally significant brick-built structures from the late Gupta period. UNESCO praised the temple's "outstanding universal value," noting its role as the site of the Buddha's enlightenment and its centrality in the development of Buddhist art, architecture, and religious thought.

While UNESCO recognition has brought international visibility, increased funding for conservation, and a surge in global Buddhist pilgrimages, it has not succeeded in mitigating the internal tensions surrounding the site. Disputes over management, control, and representation persist, and at times intensify during politically sensitive moments. The temple, instead of serving solely as a symbol of peace and spiritual liberation, has become an arena where competing narratives of heritage, faith, nationalism, and identity play out.

The struggle over the Mahabodhi Temple is emblematic of larger contestations in postcolonial India: between majority and minority rights, between secular governance and religious influence, and between historic memory and contemporary politics. The issue raises urgent questions about how sacred sites are to be managed in a multi-faith

democracy—especially those of global religious importance—and how the balance can be struck between honouring historical coexistence and addressing historical injustices.

Moving forward, any sustainable resolution will require a nuanced, inclusive, and transparent approach. It must acknowledge the deep spiritual connection Buddhists around the world have with Bodh Gaya, while also addressing the sensitivities of local Hindu communities who have long-standing ties to the site. Legal reforms alone may not suffice; what is needed is a broader dialogue that integrates legal, religious, cultural, and international perspectives. Only through such a comprehensive approach can the Mahabodhi Temple be restored as a space of shared reverence rather than religious rivalry, and as a beacon of compassion and wisdom, in accordance with the teachings of the Buddha himself.

## 8. CONCLUSION

Bodh Gaya, though modest in size, holds immense religious, historical, and cultural significance, standing as one of the most sacred pilgrimage sites in the world. Situated in the Gaya district of Bihar, it is venerated as the very place where Siddhartha Gautama attained enlightenment and became the Buddha, making it a spiritual epicentre for millions of Buddhists across the globe. Beyond its religious importance, Bodh Gaya symbolizes a shared vision of peace, wisdom, and liberation, transcending the boundaries of nationality, ethnicity, and tradition.

Yet, despite its profound spiritual resonance, the contemporary reality of Bodh Gaya is marked by persistent conflicts and contestations, particularly surrounding the governance of the Mahabodhi Temple. These disputes—rooted in colonial legacies, religious identity politics, legal ambiguities, and competing claims of ownership—have disrupted the sanctity of the site and complicated efforts to preserve it as a space of inclusive spiritual reflection. The entanglement of religious sentiment with administrative control and political interest has often overshadowed the fundamental purpose of the temple as a symbol of enlightenment and unity.

The continuing power struggle between Buddhist and Hindu stakeholders reflects deeper structural tensions in Indian society regarding minority rights, heritage management, and the role of the state in religious affairs. Such tensions threaten not only the harmonious coexistence of religious communities but also the global image of Bodh Gaya as a universal centre of Buddhist devotion and intercultural dialogue.

To preserve the spiritual and cultural integrity of Bodh Gaya, there is a pressing need for a holistic, balanced, and inclusive governance framework - one that acknowledges the site's unique historical and religious significance while fostering mutual respect, dialogue, and cooperation among all stakeholders. Legal reforms alone are insufficient unless accompanied by sincere political will, international support, and community engagement. Recognizing the Mahabodhi Temple as a shared sacred space, rather than a contested territory, is key to moving beyond confrontation.

Ultimately, safeguarding Bodh Gaya requires a collective moral and spiritual commitment to uphold the ideals enshrined in the Buddha's teachings - compassion, non-violence, mindfulness, and coexistence. Only through such efforts can Bodh Gaya continue to shine as a beacon of enlightenment and serve its true purpose: a sanctuary where humanity rediscovers its highest potential for inner peace and universal harmony.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

## REFERENCES

- Ahir, D. C., (1986), *Buddhist Shrines in India*, B. R. Publishing Corporation, Delhi.
- Ahir, D. C., (1994), *Buddha Gaya through the Ages*, Sri Satguru Publications, Delhi.
- B. M. Barua, (1931 & 1934), *Gaya and Buddha Gaya*, Indian Research Institute, Calcutta.
- Bapat, P. V., (1956), *2500 Years of Buddhism*, Publication Division, Delhi, 1956.
- Barua, D. K., (1981), *Buddha Gaya, Bodh Gaya*.

- Beal, Samuel, Si-Yu-Ki Buddhist Records of the Western World, Low Price Publications, Delhi, Reprint, 2008.
- Dhammika, S., A History of Bodhgaya, <http://www.buddhanet.net/e-learning/history/bodh-Gaya.htm>
- Dharmapala, Anagarika. 1917. Buddhism in Its Relationship to Hinduism, Calcutta: Mahabodhi Society.
- Doyle, T.N. 1997. Bodh Gaya: Journeys to the Diamond Throne and the Feet of Gayasur, Cambridge: Harvard University.
- Kinnard, J.N. 1998. "When is the Buddha Not the Buddha? The Hindu/Buddhist Battle over Bodhgaya and Its Buddha Image," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, vol. 66, no. 4: 817-839.