

Mahabodhi Temple: The legendary identity and its architecture

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Structured Abstract:

Purpose: The purpose of the work was to visit the Mahabodhi Temple in Bodh Gaya in Bihar and look into the architectural as well as the spiritual side of it.

Study Method: The study has been done on the basis of field work and some local people feedbacks.

Findings: It involved certain legendary aspects of the place, its earliest construction details along with the government's approach today to maintain it and imbibe certain reconstructions if needed.

Originality: The paper has been written with the help of the best possible sources and some in-hand archaeological experiences on a first hand basis. This was also a part of the field work organised by the Department of History, Presidency University in 2017 under the supervision of Dr. R. K. Chattopadhyay.

Keywords: Architectural, Spiritual, Reconstructions, Archaeological.

Paper Type: Research Paper.

Turning over the pages of history of Bihar since the earlier times make us very much familiar with the fact that Buddhism developed extensively and had a huge impact on the various aspects of the place related to its society, culture, art and architecture. The extreme zeal of the followers of Buddha helped in the penetration of Buddhism efficiently in the various dimensions of Bihar out of which architecture proves to be one of the most important areas of influence.

The Mahabodhi temple happens to be one of the best representations of architecture in Bihar of the ancient times though the original structure has been reconstructed according to the damages caused by the ravages of time by different persons or authorities. This site is treated as a holy one by the Buddhists and they come from all over the world to visit this place throughout the year. The spiritual attachments of the followers are mainly guided by their

sentimentalism attached to the various stories and legends of Buddha related to this shrine especially the Bodhi tree under which Gautam Buddha attained enlightenment.

The work has been an outcome of a field trip organised by the Department of History and the Archaeological Survey of India. Literary sources associated to it had been looked into along with analysing various archaeological findings with required tools.

According to the legend, Gautam Buddha after giving up his materialistic life and the extreme austerities prescribed by the Yogins came under a peepal tree (Bodhi tree) and started meditating sitting over a heap of grass facing the east. Legends also say that Mara, the god of evil spirits, tried to entice him away by offerings of worldly pleasures, but Gautama was not moved. After sometime Gautama obtained the supreme enlightenment (Samma Sambodhi) and became the Buddha. After this he passed a few more weeks in the village of Uruvila now known as Bodh Gaya undergoing various thought process after his enlightenment. During this time he was in a mental turmoil as he was torn with the ideas as to whether he should keep the supreme knowledge to himself or share it with others. As a result of this turmoil, for one week he continuously looked at the Bodhi tree followed by walking impatiently and engrossed in meditation in the consecutive two weeks. However, according to a mythical story he was given protection from rain and sun during meditation by Muchalinda, the king of serpents by spreading a hood over his head. Finally Buddha decided to share with the world his spiritual knowledge and the way to obtain peace and serenity. This was followed by his first sermon at Rishipatan (modern Sarnath) and setting in motion “the Wheel of the Law” (dharmachakrapravartana). However, it can be easily understood that Bodh Gaya or the Bodhi tree in the Mahabodhi complex led to the transition of Buddha into a spiritual being and the initial point of the growth of the principles and ideas of Buddha that later came to be termed as Buddhism.

Since the time when the first temple was built in relation with the enlightenment of Buddha it has remained a place of worship. In the long duration of time it became a religious place of heterogeneous practices and traditions and both Buddhist and Hindu came to be inscribed. (Lahiri, 2012, p. 75) This surely shows the peaceful religious coexistence of the place and the amount of flexibility that can be attached to it. The flexibility was enhanced because the ideas and view-points regarding the place of both the dominant group of believers namely Hindus and Buddhists did not lock horns with each other but was very much differentiated. The place of Gaya was treated with a special importance by the Hindus related to a person’s life after

death especially of the parents but their stay was temporary whereas Buddhism penetrated deeply in the monastic order of the place creating a coexistence of both the faiths. The presence of other faiths especially Hinduism can be easily understood by the decorations on the old railings of the shrine in which we see figures of popular Hindu divinities including one of Siva, represented with a snake hanging down from his wrist and the trident on his left along with the scenes from Buddha's life. Another example in this aspect is the presence of images of Hindu deities at the Mahabodhi complex. According to Beni Madhab Barua, the general motive behind these iconic representations was to add sanctity, charm and grandeur of the erection in the eyes of the people. However, over time, the manner in which Buddhist patrons venerated Mahabodhi underwent change. (Lahiri, 2012, p.78) The change extended from the donation of several pillars by Kurangi, the wife of King Indraghimitra to giving of cows for the production of ghee for oil lamps to be lit in the monastery.

The medieval centuries also witnessed other kinds of worship such as the Vaishnava worship as suggested both by the addition of the Gaya-mahamatya to the Vayu purana prior to the fourteenth century AD, in which there is a mention of the Bodhi druma (Bodhi tree) being a part of the Gaya pilgrim circuit and by the presence of Vishnu images of the ninth century AD at Bodh Gaya. The religious flexibility can also be traced by the information given in an inscription of the ninth century which tells us about the setting up of a Chaumukha Mahadeva (a four faced phallic emblem of Siva) within the boundaries of the temple complex. This was set up for the purpose of the snatakas (Saiva Brahmin scholars) who were the inhabitants of Mahabodhi. The site proves to be an excellent example of the sculptural wealth surrounding Buddhist images and Hindu ones. It also portrays the multiple lineages that successfully inform us about Bodh Gaya's cultural history involving patrons and pilgrims of several types and faiths. The place can be perfectly treated as a place of composite worship and even the proprietorship of a Saiva mahant at Bodh Gaya did not create any problems for the conduct of Buddhist worship. (Lahiri, 2012, p.79-80)

The famous Mahabodhi temple has undergone many restorations and renovations due to which it became rather difficult to understand its original architectural form. Presently, it consists of a square sanctum cella covered by a straight-edged conical pyramidal tower, approximately 160 feet high, crowned by a conical structure with a fluted amalaka-like lower member. Angle-amalakas appear at regular intervals at the corners of the towers dividing it into a number of bhumis. The four faces of the tower present each several tiers of niches of chaitya window shape, each of which representing a Buddhist sculpture. There is a tall lancet

opening on the front face which, apart from lighting the interior reduces the load of masonry of the lofty tower. At the base of the tower there is a rising of four turrets at the four corners, each a replica in a small scale of the main tower. An entrance porch appears on the east and is later dated than the original temple. Regarding the construction of the present temple reliable evidence is very less and thus we have to depend on the evidence of the architectural style along with the details left by the Chinese pilgrims, for knowing the approximate age of the temple. The dimensions and the general appearance and form of the Mahabodhi vihara as given by Hiuen Tsang, approximately correspond to what we now see in the temple. The relief replica of the shrine of the Mahabodhi on the terracotta plaque found at Kumrahar shows inside a square railing, the temple which is alike the present one leaving out the corner turrets although the date of the plaque has been a controversial matter.

The earliest construction at the base of the Bodhi tree was a polished sandstone throne (vajrasena) found by Cunningham buried behind a stucco-faced throne, the latter itself hidden inside the present basalt throne of the temple. On the evidence of the relief on the the railings of Bharhut, Ashoka is credited with the erection of the shrine over the vajrasena, a railing around it, a tree and a pillar with an elephant capital. The earliest remains visible now are of the first century BC. (Mitra,1980, p.61). They consist of a carved stone seat in front of the Bodhi tree, remnants of a carved quadrangular three-barred railing of pale reddish sandstone fronted by a pillared pavilion, later in turn containing a throne within and pillar bases and a detached pillar of the covered promenade (chankama) of Buddha representing the sacred spot where he spent the third week after his Enlightenment in a meditating mood walking up and down. It is now a brick structured platform with the representations of lotuses which are believed to have blossomed with the footprints of Buddha upholding the purity, serenity and spirituality generally associated with him. The railing was enlarged by new granite posts, cross bars and copings by the Guptas representing a different style of carving. The plinth of the sandstone railing and the lower parts of two broken pillars of the earlier pavilion got buried within the basement of the present temple. The southern row of pillars of the covered promenade was similarly covered by the northern wall of the new brick temple, the facade of which was decorated with images in stucco within tiers of niches.

Most of the temples of Bihar were built of bricks and have been damaged by the ravages of time. (Roy Choudhury, 1988, p. ix). The relics of ancient Pataliputra are mostly in bricks along with Nalanda and Rajgir having both brick and stone temples. The images are usually of black stone because of the abundance in supply of stone both hard and soft for making

images within the State. All the temples of Bihar do not possess the curvilinear sikharas which are said to be common in North India. The temples particularly in North Bihar are different from that of South Bihar as the later follow the pattern of temples with sikharas. The Bodh Gaya temple being an exception as it was built of stone along with few other temples. The temples of Bihar are not covered with sculptures from top to bottom giving them the impression of not being as splendid as the temples of Bhubaneshwar or Khajuraho. (Roy Choudhury, 1988, p. x). However, some of the temples have remarkably independent styles such as the Vishnupada temple at Gaya and some other temples in North Bihar, have got simple but ample domes covering the shrine. In some cases the pillars of the mandapa, if made of stone, are carved and in some cases they are not. Some of the brick-built temples have also a simple decorative design. However, rock cut temples are very few. Colong and Umga rock-cut temples in Gaya district are good specimens. We can also find excellent rock-cut sculpture in the temples at Sultanganj, Mandar and some other places.

Temples in India are intimately associated with archaeological remains. Although most of the present day temples in Bihar are not very old, Bihar has splendid archaeological remains dating back to earlier times. The legends associated with the temples of Bihar make the temples more interesting. Bihar can be easily treated as the point of intersection of different religious creed. Various currents of Hinduism like Saivism, Vaishnavism, Tantricism, Buddhism in its different phases, Jainism, Sikhism and so on. The same legend of a particular place has taken different shapes in different areas for different reasons indicating cultural complexes, The legends associated with the Bihar temples have got an influential place among the village folk, recitations, songs, ballads and social customs. In some cases the temple legends have changed into stories finding a legitimate place among the worshippers of the Godlings of Bihar. The temples and legends in a particular State show how some of the cultural trends of different areas have cut across the zone centric barriers. As a result when the communications had not developed and travelling was not easy, it was the temples that determined the main routes of communications and the trends of thoughts and exchange of ideas without limiting itself to geographical barriers. (Roy Choudhury, 1988, p. xv-xvi).

Buddhism, architectural identities and the legends associated to them can be taken to be linked with each other locating itself properly within the historical framework of Bihar and upholding itself as the perfect zone of interest completely satisfying our inquisitive thought process and strengthening our knowledge for the particular place since the earlier times.

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