

History and Context:

The state of Bihar occupies its own unique position within India. Lying in the ecologically abundant and ancient expanse of the Indo Gangetic plains the region has been a cradle of ancient Indian civilization, endowed with an immensely rich history and prehistory. The region was the setting for and birthplace of the two greatest Indian religions, Buddhism and Jainism.

In particular, the cultural and long enduring historical significance of Bodh Gaya as an ancient site is well known. From the early accounts of the Chinese pilgrims Faxian and Xuanzang to the recent musings of various New Age seekers, from Asvaghosa to Edwin Arnold, Bodhgaya has been a favorite topic. It was a hot spot of Indian archaeology after Alexander Cunningham made the famous excavation of Mahabodhi temple complex and commissioned its restoration by J D Beglar in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. It continues to be a guiding milestone for further archaeological discoveries in the region.



The spiritual resonance of the place as the site of Enlightenment for *Sakyamuni Lord Goutama Buddha*, makes the Mahabodhi temple most important pilgrimage place for Buddhists from all over the world. As the sacred power centre of the Buddhist world it is regarded as the 'navel of the earth' in Buddhist cosmology.

The Mahabodhi Temple Complex is the first temple built by Emperor Asoka in the 3rd century B.C., and the present temple dates from the 5th–6th centuries. It is one of the earliest Buddhist temples built entirely in brick, still standing, from the late Gupta period. The present Mahabodhi Temple Complex at Bodh Gaya comprises the 50 m high grand Temple, the Vajrasana, sacred Bodhi Tree and seven sacred sites of the Buddha's enlightenment.

The highlight of pilgrimage for all Buddhists is to stand beneath the bodhi tree at Bodhgaya, where the historical Buddha had attained enlightenment. This spot is marked by a stone seat, the vajrasana or 'diamond seat'. The Buddhist cultural heritage has a

long and special history that dates back to more than 2,500 years and unites most of South, South-East and East Asia.

The Mahabodhi Temple complex at Bodhgaya was designated a UNESCO World Heritage monument on 27 June 2002.

Bodhgaya is not, and never has been, only a Buddhist site. Hindus have been visiting Bodhgaya since at least the Buddha's own lifetime. It was one of the important stops along *sraddha* routes as testified by *Agni Purana* and *Mahabharata* that mentions the Mahabodhi *taru* as a place to pay obeisance in the course of a *sraddha*. It could be surmised that it was this significance of Gaya as the penultimate destination for *sraddha*, for overcoming the fetters of death, that drew Sakyamuni to the place. Gaya and Bodh Gaya share a lot of correspondence in terms of monuments, sculptures and art that has features of Brahmanical imagery drawing on both Shaivism and Vaishnavism. Moreover some Buddhist images have been given Hindu identities, chief among which is Avalokiteshvara who is worshipped as Rama, or the nine Buddha images that are presented as Panadavas with Krishna, Draupadi, Kunti and Abhimanyu. Or Mara with an arrow identified with Kamdev, the god of desire, whose arrow shook the vow of Sambhu (Siva).

Beginning in the fifteenth century and extending into the twentieth, the site has been maintained by Saivite priests who trace their lineage to 1590, when Gosain Ghamandi Giri established a monastery at Bodh Gaya. This long Shaivite management at Bodh Gaya has seen assimilation and adaptation of Buddhist symbols like the votive *stupas* as Shiv *lingams*.

At the very center of sacred site of Bodhgaya stands the Buddha image. In popular cosmology this multivalent sacred space represents iconographic open-endedness, intermingled and blurred, drawn from a shared iconographic vocabulary. A single image is viewed and treated as representing or embodying two very different figures that are the Buddha to Buddhist pilgrims and Visnu to Hindu pilgrims. This is what bestows this ancient pilgrimage complex an aura and mystique that is unique and having a universal appeal.



Bodh Gaya represents the shared cultural heritage of Hindus and Buddhists. As of now the complex is managed by Bodhgaya Temple Management Committee that acts according to the Bodhgaya Temple Act, 1949.

Deshkal Society:

Since 1995 Deshkal Society has been striving for compassionate understanding of marginal communities particularly in South Bihar located in the ecological region of middle Gangetic plain. In a society that ostracizes these communities and them as impure lower order bonded by drudgeries of grueling labour, Deshkal Society has been engaging with them in a quest to lessen their suffering and facilitate well-integrated being in their lives. The interventions of Deshkal with these marginal communities aim to enable dignity, equity, and justice through improving access to quality elementary education, entitlements for habitats, secure livelihoods and dignified existence.

Deshkal has come to understand that for these communities culture is not luxury or an expression of leisure alone. Rather it is a dynamic resource for negotiating everyday realities of dominant development. The culture of the region is endowed with traditions and cultural practices of communities like Musahars who constitute core laboring processes of paddy cultivation in the Indo Gangetic river plains.

Historically bestowed with ingenuous and intimate relation with nature, their life histories are a living testimony to deep veneration of nature for regeneration of all life. Their intangible cultural expressions encoded in myths, songs, legends, proverbs, ballads, stories relate to worshipping nature, ancestors and many folk deities. These performances punctuate sowing and harvesting of paddy, propitiate and venerate nature as life giving force, reinforce bonds with ancestors, derive guidance and protection from them and are living representations of collective assertion.

It would not be very inappropriate to surmise that the living cultural practices of these labouring communities in contemporary times do have a historical affinity to animism and tribal ethos that dominated the region in the Buddha's time. This popular culture of subalterns adds another dimension to the historical heritage of Bodhgaya and situates the region as endowed with a variety of tangible and intangible heritage.