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*Cross-disciplinary Perspectives on a Contested Site:
Bodh Gaya Jataka*

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Cross-disciplinary Perspectives on a Contested Site: Bodh Gaya Jataka

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Cross-disciplinary Perspectives on a Contested Site: Bodh Gaya Jataka. Edited by David Geary, Matthew R. Sayers, and Abhisek Sing Amar. London: Routledge, 2012, ISBN 978-0415684521 (hardback), \$150.00.

Upon entering the site of Bodh Gaya today, one immediately notices international pilgrims chanting, listening to *dharma* talks, circumambulating, prostrating, and sitting in silent meditation. Bodh Gaya is a complex of sites, including a new meditation park and the seven locations corresponding to the Buddha's time spent after enlightenment. But the main site of worship is the Mahābodhi Temple, which is believed to be the spot of the Buddha's enlightenment. On the western side of the temple stands the Bodhi Tree, said to be a direct descendent of the very same tree under which the Buddha attained enlightenment more than 2500 years ago. Outside this complex, in the village of Bodh Gaya, are monasteries from various Buddhist countries, as well as institutes offering meditation and classes on Buddhism. Therefore, Bodh Gaya today functions as a living Buddhist center of worship.

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This was not always the case. Bodh Gaya was a Hindu and Buddhist pilgrimage destination for most of its history. Sometime in the thirteenth century, however, it became very dangerous to travel to this area. Activities ceased and pilgrims stopped arriving until it eventually fell into a ruinous state. Toward the end of the sixteenth century, a wandering Hindu monk settled down in the area and his family and successors came to be known as the Mahants. They came to look upon the deserted temple as their property. In the late nineteenth century, Anagarika Dharmapala set out to restore the complex by writing to Buddhist organizations in Sri Lanka, Burma and India to raise funds. He founded the Mahābodhi Society to organize this restoration effort. Long court battles ensued to determine who exactly owned the temple. Since 1953 the temple has been under the ownership of the Bodh Gaya Temple Management Committee under a law passed by the Government of Bihar, whose members are both Buddhist and Hindu.

From this short introduction to the history of Bodh Gaya, one can already see the importance of contestation, competition, and change. This is the focus of the most recent edited volume, *Cross-disciplinary Perspectives on a Contested Site*, about this significant Buddhist location. The introduction to the volume, written by the editors, explains its main objectives and contributions. The editors assert that currently little scholarship exists that addresses the multifaceted history of this site. This volume utilizes various disciplines to illuminate the complexity of Bodh Gaya from the perspectives of archaeology, history, religion, anthropology, and tourism. To this end, most of the introduction is comprised of a comprehensive and useful literature review of scholarship on Bodh Gaya. The editors describe how each piece of scholarship illuminates our understanding of the architectural history, social and political dimensions of the site, or the current juxtaposition of Bodh Gaya as both a tourist site and an important site of Buddhist worship. As well, older publications about the site cannot reflect current perspectives nor follow the rapid changes occurring within Bodh Gaya. This volume, although it too will become dated, covers a large swath of

new ground concerning the historical and contemporary situation of the location.

The editors make clear, however, that this volume is not comprehensive but rather constitutes a selective portrayal of particular themes. The essays within the volume, in fact, are likened to a Jataka story, or tale of one of the Buddha's previous lives. In the same ways, both the book and the Jatakas illuminate aspects of the nature of the Buddha and Bodh Gaya but do not offer a complete picture. Focusing on these particular conjunctures within the history of Bodh Gaya is a successful strategy, as the reader begins to understand the meaning of the place throughout time. The main theme that all the contributors to this volume successfully speak to is contestation. Each work discusses an issue related to the contestation of Bodh Gaya throughout its history as issues of ownership, identity, and access permeate the volume. The volume succeeds in qualifying hegemonic voices that seek to define Bodh Gaya singularly as the authentic Buddhist site when its history reveals a multiplicity of voices.

The first section of the volume, "Empowering the Landscape of the Buddha," looks in an in-depth fashion at the textual and archaeological history of Bodh Gaya. In Matthew R. Sayers's essay, titled "Gaya-Bodh Gaya: The Origins of a Pilgrimage Complex," he tries to answer the question, why did the Buddha choose to go to Bodh Gaya to strive for enlightenment? Through this inquiry we learn the early conjunctures of Hindu and Buddhist pilgrimage sites that continue to intermingle today. Sayers looks at the origins of this pilgrimage complex and how it was imagined during the lifetime of the Buddha. Understanding Brahmanical and Buddhist sources, he creates a nuanced view of the significance the site held from the time of the Buddha to the beginning of the Common Era. He argues against previous scholarship that claims the area was already a location of Brahmin pilgrimage. Instead, the Buddha chose this spot because it was an appropriate environs for an ascetic. Pilgrimage associated with Gaya only occurred

after knowledge of the Buddha's awakening became well known. Sayers provides ample evidence for this view through his careful attention to both Hindu and Buddhist sources.

Abhisek Singh Amar provides archaeological and textual evidence for the imagining and creation of the site at Bodh Gaya in his essay "Sacred Bodh Gaya: The *Buddhakṣetra* of Gotama Buddha." He discusses the problem of the nineteenth-century reconstruction of sacred features of Bodh Gaya by Sir Alexander Cunningham. Scholars continue to use Cunningham's research instead of looking at earlier evidence as Amar convincingly does in this essay. He bases his evidence on the seventh-century account of the Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang. Amar also makes the larger argument that sacred landscapes should be analyzed as a set using a holistic approach rather than fragmenting each site within the complex. By adding material evidence such as Vishnu statues, Amar finds that the Buddhist pilgrimage site was inclusive of Hindu worship, demonstrating the wish of the Buddhist *saṅgha* at the time to include a broad religious context. In this way he highlights the innovation and creativity of the *saṅgha* in developing this site.

Janice Leoshko in "The Changing Landscape at Bodh Gaya" analyzes the work of Orientalist and British archaeologists who held up the Mahābodhi Temple's past glory in contrast to today's deterioration. In this bifurcation, she highlights how this Orientalist view led early scholars to miss periods of intense devotion. She provides a case study of a stone stele written by a Chinese Buddhist named Yunshu in order to demonstrate the changing landscape of the site. She argues against those scholars who have privileged Bodh Gaya as an authentic Buddhist site. Instead, Leoshko advocates understanding this sacred site as a series of layers, accretions, or preservations. This method will help us recognize a particular actor's selective appropriation and the site's multi-vocal past. Therefore, much of the site today is based on assumptions and renovations relying on non-Indian, non-authoritative sources. She successfully demonstrates the processes of change that have occurred in

the Bodh Gaya landscape, highlighting how the Western view was not the only reimagining of the site.

The volume continues to focus on archaeological evidence in the form of Mahābodhi Temple reproductions in Southeast Asia in Frederick M. Asher's "Bodh Gaya and the issue of Originality in Art." Areas in Bagan, Myanmar, and Chiang Mai, Thailand, Asher discusses, became known for these replicas so that pilgrimage to the actual location was unnecessary. He argues that these sites are meant to transport the viewer to a different place and time. Even the Mahābodhi Temple itself has been altered in form repeatedly so replicas can offer a way to see the temple before it was currently reimagined. These sites evoke and give the sense of being in Bodh Gaya through architecture, as well as signs and structures around the main temple identifying where the Buddha spent his first seven weeks after enlightenment. Asher asserts that conditions in Bihar after the twelfth century were inhospitable to pilgrims and this caused Bodh Gaya to become a place more fluid and less fixed in its geographical location.

The second section, called "Monumental Conjectures: Rebirths and Retellings," looks at the modern, colonial history of the site. These essays discuss the nature of British colonial assumptions about religion and the law and how this was contested by Indian and international groups. Alan Trevithick discusses the legal contests over the site involving the Śaivite monastics in control of the Bodh Gaya complex, the British government, and a new Buddhist group, the Mahābodhi Society, in his "Established usage and absolute freedom of religion at Bodh Gaya: 1861-1915." Trevithick argues that no one group was dominant nor set the terms of this power struggle. He first describes each of the perspectives of these groups, then the legal decisions that have influenced the site today. He provides an in-depth historical account of legal battles concerning control of Bodh Gaya. Highlighting the ways British colonialists categorized Buddhist and Hindu worship, Trevithick analyzes how religious worship was divided in the nineteenth century.

He contrasts this with the open and inclusive earlier history of the site. It is interesting to note the diversity of Buddhist practice in regards to worship and temple maintenance, so that the British had no unified group or standard they could identify as Buddhist in their rulings.

Noel Salmond investigates an all-important figure within the history of Bodh Gaya, Anagarika Dharmapala, in “Queen Victoria Beneath the Bodhi Tree: Anagarika Dharmapala as Anti-imperialist and Victorian.” He explores the contradictions of this Sri Lankan figure as both an Anglophile as well as challenger of colonial authority. This is a small aspect of the history of this site that highlights the uniqueness of this volume. However, no volume about Bodh Gaya would be complete without an in-depth look at this individual. Specifically, Salmond analyzes a letter Dharmapala wrote to the viceroy of India proposing a memorial altar to Queen Victoria at the foot of the Bodhi Tree at Bodh Gaya upon her death in 1901. He argues that there is not just political maneuvering in this strategy but also sincerity in Dharmapala’s admiration of the British crown. Salmond argues that he was both a Victorian and anti-imperialist by looking at evidence of his reinterpretation of Buddhism that was influenced by his exposure to English schooling and culture.

C. Robert Pryor in “Bodh Gaya in the 1950s: Jawaharlal Nehru, Mahant Giri, and Anagarika Munindra” continues this discussion of modern history with an analysis of legal battles during the time when the temple transitioned from the control of the Śaivite Mahant to government administration. He also examines the 1950s conflict between Hindu and Buddhist groups in the management of the Mahābodhi Temple. The conflict was resolved through the establishment of a shared Hindu and Buddhist administration under the Bodh Gaya Temple Act, the transformation of rituals within the temple to conform with Buddhist worship, and the international celebration of the 2500th anniversary of the Buddha’s passing by the Indian government in 1956. Pryor sifts through the history of the 1950s to determine which forces

are still present in dealing with current issues today concerning tourism and development. Today, the Mahābodhi Society and the Bodh Gaya Management Committee have diverged and are in opposition in terms of the development of the site. The Mahābodhi Society, like the foreign temples in the area, considers development for profit problematic. Today, the Indian government, foreign Buddhist temples, and local businesses contest how the site should be developed—all with roots in a similar contest in the 1950s.

Tara N. Doyle in “‘Why Cause Unnecessary Confusion?’: Re-inscribing the Mahābodhi Temple’s Holy Places” discusses how the site came to have a particular narrative of the Buddha’s post-enlightenment actions. This occurred through signboards that identified events during the seven weeks after the Buddha’s enlightenment. Concretizing the location and order of these events not only emphasizes this as a Buddhist site, but also creates a master narrative that is easy for tourists to visit and understand. Doyle discusses how a number of possibilities exist given the multiple biographies of the Buddha and other spots within the complex that could have been highlighted as significant. Therefore Doyle’s interesting account of how the seven-week scheme came to be officially sanctioned within the Mahābodhi Temple is an important insight into the contested nature not only of the site, but also of the recording of the Buddha’s life. She interviews the local Theravāda monks responsible for this arrangement and how this quickly became the master narrative. Therefore, instead of focusing on the sacred sites themselves, Doyle investigates the agents and actors that contributed to the current landscape. With these important interviews placed within the wider socio-historical background, this is one of the most interesting chapters, which helps us understand the reasons for the current landscape of the Bodh Gaya complex.

The third section consists of ethnographic works about contemporary issues entitled “Universal Dreams and Local Departures.” David Geary in “World Heritage in the Shadow of Zamindari”

investigates the role that listing Bodh Gaya as a UNESCO World Heritage site had on creating a hegemonic Buddhist past. He offers an overview of the recent history of the site along with an analysis of the events leading up to the UNESCO designation. Geary then explicates an in-depth account of the late 1990s power struggles involving the Mahābodhi Society and Indian government parties. Upon UNESCO designation status in 2002, Geary argues that attempts to set aside conflicts and demands on the site by universalizing it for international consumption have failed. Old and new conflicts as well as re-inscriptions of difference remain under the surface.

Jessica Marie Falcone in “Maitreya, or the Love of Buddhism: The Non-Event of Bodh Gaya’s Giant Statue” presents an interesting account investigating the Maitreya Statue intended to be constructed in Bodh Gaya by the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition (FPMT) that never manifested. She describes both her fieldwork at the Root Institute, an FPMT center in Bodh Gaya, and her lecture about this fieldwork for undergraduates in the USA. Following Latour in his *Aramis, or the Love of Technology*, she highlights why a non-event is significant in its failure. She finds that the Maitreya statue is a map of meanings within a particular social setting and context. The social dynamics of actors and the beliefs and practices of her informants are all unearthed through this cultural biography of a failed event.

Kory Goldberg in “Universal Education and Social Transformation in Bodh Gaya” discusses the impetus for moral tourism and engaged Buddhism that fuels such projects as FPMT’s Maitreya School’s “Universal Education” program. This second essay concerning the FPMT focuses on Buddhist education. The author is clearly impressed with the ideals and values of this school and demonstrates the ways the program benefits the teachers and the wider society of Bodh Gaya. Within the context of socially engaged Buddhism, many tourists and pilgrims are interested in helping organizations address the poverty of the wider Bodh Gaya area. Supporting the curriculum with quotes and ideas from

education experts, Goldberg praises the Maitreya School as a possible solution to a lack of education options in the area. He also discusses how the Buddhist curriculum is practiced at the school through his observations and teaching during fieldwork.

Jason Rodriguez in “NGOs, Corruption, and Reciprocity in the Land of Buddha’s Enlightenment” addresses another addition to the Bodh Gaya landscape—NGOs. He investigates the contested forms of development and analyzes a particular NGO’s difficulty in surviving through an uneasy partnership between European and Indian workers. With an in-depth look at the NGO scene in Bodh Gaya, contextualized within the history of Bihar’s development efforts, Rodriguez deftly follows the contrast of Bodh Gaya as both a Buddhist pilgrimage center and a place in need of development. He describes two separate fieldwork periods. In the first period he does not yet understand the wider context of the NGO world and relies too closely on a ‘moral idealism’ as well as his informants’ views too closely. In his second fieldwork period he is able to see the wider landscape and realize that not all NGOs are corrupt. The most significant part of his discussion analyzes how Western Buddhists who describe themselves as socially engaged are practicing a kind of latent Orientalism. They want to offer social development to the people of Bodh Gaya in order to help them with their own perceived lack of spiritual development. The sacred East meets the rational West again.

This volume as a whole can be read to understand the contested nature of a religio-cultural site. For Buddhist studies scholars this volume is a contribution to our knowledge of historical and ethnographic scholarship on this internationally known destination. Read in parts, those interested in archaeology or the anthropology of religion can obtain valuable information from particular sections. However, because of the nature of its diverse essays, the volume does not offer a readable overview of major historical points or actors involved with the site, nor is that the aim of the collection. The introduction could have included some basic historical information to

clear this up for a wider readership. A brief overview covering the early history, the colonial past, and contemporary issues of Bodh Gaya would enhance the accessibility of this collection. As well, a map of the site today and the basic sites that the authors discuss would be helpful for the reader to visualize the Bodh Gaya complex. For that information readers will have to look at other books. Therefore, this book is recommended for those who already have some knowledge of Bodh Gaya and are interested in South Asia, Buddhism, and world heritage sites.