



CATERING TO THE 'CONSCIOUSNESS OF THE SACRED' IN BODHGAYA, BIHAR

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ABSTRACT

Bodhgaya, the birthplace of Buddhism, is a revered axis mundi for all Buddhist denominations; offering a lot in terms of its 'Living Religious Heritage'. In the last few decades, the influx of pilgrims and tourists has multiplied manifold, giving the town a religiously, historically and culturally significant status. However, it is evident that the designation of a UNESCO World Heritage site to this place has transformed the overall sacred landscape into a fractured commercialized touristscape. It is currently being consumed by millions of 'spiritual' tourists, who, either remain unaware of the immense heritage of the land or miss out on experiencing the sacred in its true essence. The study, hence, investigates the present scenario, identifies challenges and opportunities and proposes interventions. The ultimate goal is to mellow down not just visitors, but natives by helping them to understand the essence of 'impermanence and change' and reinstating the 'consciousness of the sacred'.

KEYWORDS : sacred landscape, commercialized touristscape, consciousness

1.0 Introduction: Why Bodhgaya?

Located in the Gaya District of Bihar, India, Bodhgaya is a quaint yet globally renowned town of immense religious and cultural significance. It owes its prominence to the narrative which suggests that Lord Buddha attained enlightenment here, more than 2500 years ago, under the Bodhi tree. It has a tremendous cultural connotation and is, therefore, an extremely important center for national as well as international tourism.

The cultural tradition of the town dates back to the times of Emperor Ashoka. He built the first tree shrine here in 260 BCE. The town has been a well-known pilgrim destination since then. Bodhgaya lies at the focal point of the Buddhist tourist circuit. Mahabodhi temple complex in the heart of Bodhgaya is one of the four holy sites related to the life of Buddha (City Development Plan for Bodhgaya under the JNNURM, 2006).

The prestige and profile of the town have grown in the recent years with its designation of a UNESCO World Heritage site, convening of the momentous Kalachakra festival and construction of monasteries by various Southeast Asian countries (Geary, 2009). The establishment of monasteries here not only reaffirms its position in the Buddhist world but are also symbolic of the 2500 year old long journey of the Buddhist faith, a journey which began here and spread all over the world, to again come back full circle to the place of its origin where it all began (City Development Plan for Bodhgaya under JNNURM, 2006)

2.0 Speculating on the changing scenario

Assuming the official designation of UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2002, as a point of reference in time, Bodhgaya has witnessed a transformation from a 'rural town' to a 'global destination'. However, the process has entailed complex repercussions. The cultural memory of the built environment, underlining the relevance of its historical, cultural and socio-religious roots, has changed dynamically. With its entry into the global tourist circuit, rapid urbanization began to obliterate its genius loci. Beginning with massive explosion of hotels, guesthouses and other relevant ventures, commercialization began to affect the spatial environment of 'peacefulness' in this hallowed site. Earlier, the commercial landscape revolved around the local bazaar, adjacent to the Main Temple Complex and along the central town road, contributing to the informal economy of tourism. As a space for dynamic convergence for Yang (1998), it served as a setting to narrate excerpts from the experiences of local livelihood. These establishments, which were once filled with charming local hospitality began to impregnate with 'sly monks' and 'beggars in robes'; deteriorating the experience intrinsically. In the changing times which began to see Bodhgaya as a 'site of global connection', both positive and negative experiences added to the scene. In the wake of economic boost through international connections, there

was a gradual rise of a cosmopolitan atmosphere in the town. However, in the shadow of this culture, what went unnoticed was a growing economy of alcohol and drugs. Men from neighbouring areas would spend weekends in the dark lanes of restaurants, only to look at foreign women, eat chinese and drink whiskey! Humble pilgrims were now offered a contorted picture of the 'once sacred landscape', as they would wade through touts, hawkers, hustlers, swarms of beggars, pestering youth, unregulated development and dirt to reach the place of enlightenment.

Another major incident, which drastically changed the fabric of the built environment surrounding the Temple Complex, was the series of bombings in Bodhgaya in 2013. The post-attack security measures undertaken by the government led to the abandoning of the lively bazaar, adjacent to the Main Temple Complex; causing a major loss to the economy as well as distinctive vibrant character of the landscape.

An understanding of this phase of metamorphosis, certainly evokes a sense of nostalgia and lament, triggering the need to address the state of concern.

3.0 Exploring the scope of intervention :

identifying challenges and opportunities Driven purely by an innocent concern, as observed closely since childhood over a span of nearly fifteen years with varied levels of understanding, I was spontaneously compelled to ponder over the scope of intervention. Probable issues of interest, to be focussed upon in Bodhgaya, were recognised as follows:

- Provision of balanced and equitable development which improves the quality of life for the residents.
- Protection and conservation of the historical, cultural and archaeological fabric of the town.
- Promotion of environmentally-sensitive development of the World Heritage precinct.
- Promotion of socio-economic development that looks after the concerns of all sections of the community.
- Provision of a framework in which Bodhgaya can develop as a World Buddhist Centre and a centre of learning.

However, on delving deeper into plans of action, I soon realized that "Heritage Led Perspective Development Plan for Bodhgaya, Vision 2005 – 2031" and several other related plans, such as "Site Management Plan for the Mahabodhi Temple complex" (April 2005), "City Development Plan for Bodhgaya under the JNNURM" (July 2006), "City Development Plan 2010 – 2030: Bodhgaya", covered most of the above mentioned issues on a policy level. In such a situation, I decided to explore what would be a more sensitive way of interpreting the needs of Bodhgaya in the present context and

how could these ideal plans be brought to terms with reality.

A major part of the challenge lied in the lacking transparency of processes as they progressed from papers to actions. Pre-conceived notions and apprehensions of the local community towards 'change' also led to alienated and unsuccessful attempts.

4.0 The proposed interventions

The situation demands for an approach which formulates action plans to revitalize the overall picture. The underlining idea is to re-establish a reciprocal relationship between the 'living religious heritage', tourism and the inherent 'sacredness' of the landscape.

• Working on the Urban Fabric

To begin with, strengthening the fabric of the town, which is in a state of transition from 'rural to urban', is a crucial attempt. The process delves upon the understanding that in a celebrated precinct, heritage assets should belong to all citizens, tourists and pilgrims equally, to foster social inclusion. A bottoms-up approach is more likely to be suitable, in the given case, based on citizen participation and engagement in nurturing the fabric. Efforts should be streamlined to rejuvenate the old town by giving it back to its people; but this time; with a higher consciousness of the value of what belongs to them. A 'Heritage Walk' is proposed to weave together the Main Temple Complex, the monasteries built by different Buddhist countries and other significant 'sites of memory', enriched with the narratives from trained local guides. The walkable spine shall connect the monuments with one another through meaningful and experiential routes, that unravels as one treads. This spine branches out to create public squares that become settings for celebrating heritage. A Master Plan envisions this zone as a heritage nerve centre with add-on proposals like the Centre for Buddhist Consciousness and Experience, adaptive re-use of old buildings for public activities like information centres, food courts, widening alternate routes etc. An orderly but non-uniform urban design along stretches leading to the Temple Complex, gives priority to non-motorised mobility. It proposes a fundamental change in the visual texture of the place by using the grain of the integrated cobbled flooring. Upholding an inclusive policy towards its valuable stakeholders-the shopkeepers and local residents, who suffered major losses after the bombings in 2013, the plan attempts to make up for the damage caused. The vibrant 'streets as connectors' orient tourists and pilgrims to the ethos of the ordinary people. It begins to create an urban networking against a cognitive setting, eventually weaving the fabric of the entire city.

• Re-routing Circulation patterns

The circulation pattern of the Temple Complex demands a strategic re-routing. The campus of the proposed Centre for Buddhist Consciousness and Experience shall be located on an excavation site, lying towards the south-west of the Temple Complex. The re-routing shall aim to re-distribute the increasing pedestrian traffic on the entry plaza of the Temple; which currently serves as both entry and exit routes, by opening up the West Gate of the Complex to exit, in order to achieve a uni-directional flow. This would also provide an opportunity to undergo the experiential journey at the Centre, after visiting the Temple Complex.

• Proposing a Centre for Buddhist Consciousness and Experience

The proposed Centre shall offer an experiential journey beginning with insights on the colours of Bodhgaya; its heritage and culture, the birth and evolution of Buddhism in Bodhgaya, its growth, associated elements of understanding and followed by delving into the teachings of the faith.

It would be located at the former site of Taradih village, which was turned into an excavation site during the British Raj. The proposal opposes the Gautam Van project and the construction of tourist cottages directly on top of this sensitive archaeological mound.

An endeavour of bringing about positive changes in the lives of people wrecked by extreme suffering, either physical or mental, has been woven into the Centre by introducing a Forum for Social Exchange. The Forum shall work on the principle of 'Healing through Interaction and Motivation'. However, the inspiring talks and discussions of these real-life warriors shall be recorded simultaneously and served as a 'Food for Thought' to visitors at the very outset of their journey, driving them into contemplation.

The experience shall be created by employing 'the tool of museography'. A 'trigger-based audio guide' shall serve as a seamless overlay on the exhibit environments, as the visitor moves from one gallery to the other. Working with time and space, the scenographic exhibit environments would endeavour to create a theatrical, tactile experience through meaningful reconstruction of the historical content. Galleries shall comprise of elements from multiple active media that allow appropriate rendition of the narrative aiming at better interpretation of the posed content.

For all its serenity, it shall attempt to resolve the conflict between the self and the business of the social world by using architecture as the method of manipulating that relationship.

5.0 Conclusion

The assets of religious and socio-cultural heritage in Bodhgaya should not be seen as relics from the past, but should bear testimony to our ability to adapt to change in the present, while preserving its authenticity and remaining conscious of its 'sacredness'. With this enlightened approach, if the twenty-first century will be an urban century and more significantly, a century of Asian urbanization according to Roy(2009), perhaps Bodhgaya might serve as a model in this dynamic context of aspiring cities.

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