

Buddhism in the Land of Viṣṇu: An Unique Case of Gayā Tīrtha

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Abstract: *Lying in the western bank of the Phalgu river, the holy tract of Gayā in South Bihar attract thousands of pilgrims over the years. Gayā is popularly known as a Vaiṣṇavite Tīrtha as detailed in the Puranic corpus mainly. But Gayā inherits an underlying tradition of Buddhism embedded in its religious sphere. Several literary and archaeological sources indicate this religious acculturation inherent within various nuanced references. This paper intends to search those nuances and briefly discuss about them hereby presenting a synthetic religious picture of the Gayā Tīrtha.*

Keywords: Gayā, religious, Buddhism, Vaiṣṇavism, Tīrtha

Indian religious culture possesses a heterodox and multi-lineal tradition where different faiths and beliefs co-exist together in keeping peace and harmony. In the wide spectrum of the Indian religious belief, pilgrimage holds a very significant position. Undertaking pilgrimage or visiting a sacred site or what we call as Tīrtha is one of the earliest and continuing tradition in India. A sacred site with pious shrines of deities and heritages of rituals actually play a crucial role in connecting this vast land into an unitary network. Gayā, the famous Āsura Tīrtha in India claims its antiquity from the dawn of Indian civilization. However, situating on the western bank of the river Phalgu, Gayā is known as a famous Vaiṣṇavite Tīrtha with the sacred lotus foot print of Lord Viṣṇu and the shrine of the same, but, Gayā in the state of Bihar too inherits tradition of Buddhism in the same land. Several literary and archaeological sources of Brahmanical and Buddhist faith testify the same.

During the beginning of the Christian era, Gayā was frequently known as an important town of south Bihar. The antiquity of the tradition of Gayā's ancient legend is definitely proved by the Saundarānanda and Buddhacarita of Aśvaghōṣa, composed in the first or second centuries A.D., which refers Gayā as a place of splendour and prosperity.¹ Further these texts speak of Buddha's visit to the hermitage of the royal sage Gaya.² The earliest literary works of the Buddhists like, Vinayaṭīka, Saṃyuttanikāya, Anguttaranikāya, Suttanipāta very often mention Gayā as Gayā-tīrta, Gayāśira, Gayānadi etc.,³ referring to the sanctity of that place. In Buddhist literature Gayā is sometimes called as Brahmagayā, similar to Brahmasara stated in the epic Mahābhārata, in order to avoid the confusion with the Bodhgayā.⁴ Notably, all these works are ascribed to the Pre-Christian era. All these works unanimously agree on the fact that Buddha stayed at Gayā on several occasions. Anguttaranikāya states that Brahmagayā was the first destination where Buddha went in quest of spiritual truth and after attaining enlightenment at Bodhgayā, again

Gayāśira was the place from where he preached the famous Gayāśira.⁵ If Gayā was not famous for pilgrimage and spirituality, the Buddha would not repeatedly visit that place for spiritual enlightenment. The Buddhist Pali canon also records the reputation of Gayā as a Tīrtha because of two grand festivals observed there. One was the Gayā-Phaggu or the yearly bathing ceremony when all people of Anga and Magadha gathered at the bank of Phalgu,⁶ and the another one was the Agniṣṭoma fire sacrifice conducted by the Jaṭilas or those who had matted hair or Jaṭā alias the Vedic ascetics.⁷ Buddhacarita by Aśvaghōṣa, a work of first century A.D., refers that Buddha converted thousands of people to his faith at Gayā. Buddhaghōṣa of fifth century A.D., applies the name Gayā both to a locality and a bathing place near it, but Dharmapāla in the sixth century, in his Udāna Commentary, mentions Gayānadi and Gayāpuṣkariṇī as two distinct bathing places both known as Gayā Tīrtha which wash away all the sins of the pilgrims.⁸ Possibly, Gayā did bear some influences of Buddhism too, which is why, the Buddhists, being usually critics to Brahmanism, never demeaned Gayā. But, the Buddhist literature never directly mentioned about the performance of Śrāddha rituals at Gayā, rather the Buddhist notion of Tīrtha is similar to Vedic idea of Bathing and performing sacrifice. But all the Buddhist texts admitted Gayā's sanctity that is already proven to be existed from the Pre-Buddhist era.

The epic and Purāṇic literatures repeatedly proclaim the ritualistic holiness of Gayā tīrtha as a place of observing funeral oblations of the ancestors or performing Śrāddha ceremony. However, the Buddhists too recognize this continuing holistic tradition in Gayā in their canons. Both Buddhaghōṣa and Dharmapāla in their commentaries gives detailed description about the aṭṭhaka or aṣṭaka ceremony which was an annual ceremonial bathing performance observed in the dark fortnights of the different months in Gayā. This aṣṭaka is actually the familiar technical term in Brahmanical Hinduism denoting a special kind of

1. Arya, Samarendra Narayan, *History of Pilgrimage in Ancient India : 300-1200*, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 2004, pp - 61

2. Sircar, *The Geography of Ancient and Medieval India*, Motilal Banarsidas Pvt. Ltd., Delhi, 1960, pp - 227

3. Sircar, *ibid*, pp - 229

4. Sircar, *ibid*, pp - 230

5. Paul, "Antiquity of Viṣṇupāda at Gaya: Tradition and Archaeology", *Journal East and West*, Vol 35, No. 1/3, 1985, pp - 109

6. Barua, *Gaya And Buddha Gaya, Vol 1, Revised Edition*, Cotton Press and Messrs. U Roy & Sons, Calcutta, 1934, pp - 91

7. Barua, *ibid*, pp - 96

8. Arya, *ibid*, pp - 63

performance solely concerned with the funeral oblations and rites, especially, the ceremonial offerings to the departed forefathers; which was known as *pubba-peta-bali* (Pāli equivalent to the *Piṇḍapitṛyaṅga*).⁹ The *Majjhima-Nikāya* also speaks about the same. The *Sutta* and *Nikāya* texts present that the Buddha too sanctioned the ritual of simple but formal offering of Rice-cakes of the Hindus within the Buddhist ritualistic sphere as it shows the simple act of piety to the ancestors. Further, as per Brahmanical law, the funerary obligations was attached to the inheritance of ancestral property, Buddha therefore sanctioned the ritual of ancestral offerings.¹⁰ Thus, Buddhist literatures greatly deal with the *śrāddha* rites and often mentions about the performance of *aṣṭaka* ceremony in *Gayā* at the life-time of Buddha. So, from the historical interpretation of the Pāli canon, we may hypothesized that even at the life-time of Buddha, *Gayā* was known as a holy place of performing the funeral oblations and *Piṇḍa* offerings.¹¹

The archaeological sources of early medieval era also trace the tradition of Buddhism well-rooted in the mainland of *Vaiṣṇavite Gayā*. For instance, we may remember the *Gayā* temple inscription of the Pāla king *Nārāyaṇapāla*. The epigraph has been seen engraved at the wall of the *Mahādeva* shrine in the compound of the *Viṣṇupāda* temple complex. It was issued on the *Vaiśākhī-Pūrṇimā* in the seventh regnal year of *Nārāyaṇapāla* (specifically 870 A.D.). It records the dedication of a *Vāsa* or house at *Gayā* made by *Bhaṭṭa Bhānudeva* for the housing of the ascetics and also refers to the house as an *Āśrama* or *Maṭha* for the *Brahmacārīs*. The record interestingly calls *Āśrama* as *Maṭha* plausibly to indicate a monastery.¹² Such reference might show that in *Gayā* was also a place of Buddhist faith and Buddhist ascetics went or inhabited there. Alongside, it was a land of Brahmanical beliefs too. Moreover, D. C. Sircar has opined following some scholar that the term '*Lokenātha*' used in the epigraph is actually referring to the Buddha instead of *Viṣṇu*, because the Pālas were Buddhist by faith; or it was the evidence of considering Buddha as one of the incarnation of *Viṣṇu*,¹³ another argument may have been sited that during the Pāla era, in Bengal, the neighboring land of *Gayā*, *Avalokiteśvara-Lokenātha* was one of the most popularly venerated *Mahāyānī* Buddhist Deity who was actually an amalgamation of Hindu God *Sūrya-Viṣṇu* and the Buddha.¹⁴ This tradition might have been followed in *Gayā* too because of the political unity as both Bengal and Bihar was ruled by the Pāla monarchs. Whatever it could be, but the epigraph surely proves that *Gayā* was a holy site or a *tīrtha* where both Buddhists and Hindus visited regularly which necessitated the erection and donation of resting house for the ascetics and pilgrims.

Actually, Hinduism and Buddhism, though apparently opposite in philosophical vision have juxtaposed and

synchronized together in both spatial establishment and ritualistic manner in *Gayā*. From the 5th or 6th centuries A.D., or even from a still earlier date, *Śaivism* became influent in this region under the strong support of the most powerful ruler of contemporary Eastern India, *Śaśānka*. *Hiuen-tsang* informs that the king ordered to place a figure of *Maheśvara* by removing the statue of Buddha in *Bodhagayā*. B. M. Barua thinks that it was actually an attempt to establish the *Śaivite* hegemony over other Hindu Faiths but not to eliminate Buddha's eminence. It seems that Barua's opinions are quite logical when same are testified by the later charters belonged to the Pāla age. A 10th century epigraphic record of *Keśava*, son of *Ujjvala*, the stone-cutter clearly speaks that the *Śaivite* *Brāhmin* scholars of entire *Gayā* region including *Bodhagayā* lived side by side with the Buddhists without any feeling of enmity. The record further states that a devout Hindu was freely allowed to set up a stone-figure of *Śiva* within the temple of Buddha for the benefit of the *Śaivite* *Brāhmin* scholars of the locality.¹⁵ Even the prominent scholars like *Cunningham* and *Rajendralal Mitra* too draw our attention to such flexible religious assimilation observed and followed in the whole *Gayā* region where Buddhists symbols and iconographies are adopted and venerated by the local Hindus. *Mitra* has pointed out that in *Bodhagayā*, the Buddhist stupas are used in the Hindu rituals by the *Śaivite* *Mahāntas*.¹⁶ On the contrary, *Debjani Paul* has presented another line of argument where she has shown that Hinduism too influenced Buddhist practices and customs greatly. She tells, "... it may not be unreasonable to think that, since in all probability the *Viṣṇupāda* at *Gayā* was already in existence during the life-time of their Master, the Buddhists might have conceived the idea of foot-print worship from that celebrated precedence almost next door to the *Tathāgata's* place of enlightenment.¹⁷ All these inferences reveal one fact inevitably, that *Gayā* underwent through religious assimilation from much ancient era.

The Puranic legend of *Gayā* refers to some sparse indications that help us understand that *Gayā* might have been occupied greatly by the Buddhists before *Vaiṣṇavism* got the stronghold in that area. The *Vāyu Purāṇa* narrates a story where due to excessive greed for the gifts and wealth, the *Brāhmaṇas* were cursed by Lord *Brahmā*. Another story emphasizes the fervidity of a merchant to get rid of the cycle of birth and the fruitlessness of Vedic sacrifices.¹⁸ These accounts throw some light on the ongoing tension between the Hindus and the Buddhists and the Hindus chose the Preserver God *Viṣṇu* to conquer over the heretics. But, it seems that another factor also played its part in establishing the hegemony of *Viṣṇu* over the Buddha. As we have already seen, that even after being reputed as a *Vaiṣṇava* *Tīrtha*, *Gayā* did not forget its Buddhist tradition, as evident from the inscription of Pālas where we often find the mention of the existence of *Bhikṣhus* and *Maṭhas* in *Gayā* city. On the other hand, the old *Maha-Bodhi* shrine and the

9. Barua, *ibid*, pp - 239-244

10. Barua, *ibid*, pp - 267-268

11. Barua, *ibid*, pp - 244

12. *Epigraphia Indica, Volume XXXV*, Sircar D.C. (ed.), Archaeological Survey of India, New Delhi, 1963-1964, No.- 32.1, pp - 225-228

13. *Epigraphia Indica, Vol, XXXV, No.- 32.1*, *ibid*, pp - 226

14. Roy, *Niharranjan, Bangaleer Itihas, Aadi Parba*, Deys Publishing, Kolkata, 8th ed., 2015, pp - 677

15. Barua, *ibid*, pp - 228-230

16. Kumar Amit, "Mapping Multiplicity : The Complex Landscape of Bodh Gayā", in *Sociological Bulletin 64(1)*, January-April, 2015, Indian Sociological Society

17. Paul, *ibid*, 139-140

18. Arya, *ibid*, pp- 152

stone railing of Buddha-Gayā consists of several images and motifs of solar zodiac, popular Hindu divinities like Goddess Gangā, Goddess Śrī.¹⁹ The sacred bodhi-tree is too revered by both Hindus and Buddhists. Even we have former reference of peaceful co-existence of Śaivas and Buddhists in the area. Such type of coalition was feasibly the contribution of the Vaiṣṇava doctrine of incarnation. The Vaiṣṇava avatāravāda was severely influenced by the Buddhist concept of former Bodhisattvas and this incarnated forms of Lord Viṣṇu appeared to have been worshipped from the early beginning of the Christian era.²⁰ The Brāhmanical mechanism of the identification of Buddha as an incarnation of Viṣṇu was necessitated by the contemporary need of social structure. It seems that Gayā was primarily occupied by Buddhists because of the existence of the famous Buddhist sacred site Bodhgayā in close vicinity to the proper Gayā. The prime Buddhist holy site Bodhgayā is situated in close vicinity of the proper Gayā and Bodhgayā is affiliated in the greater region of Gayā-Kṣhetra, otherwise Buddhist travelers did not visit that place. One can obviously deduce that during the re-emergence of wide spread Brahmanical culture or 'Puranic Hinduism' in the early medieval era, the leaders of Brahmanical faiths could not very cordially accept such spread of Buddhism and they might have searched for some preventive measures. This was the reason that the Purāṇas declared the suzerainty of Lord Viṣṇu in Gayā. When the reclusion of the heretics was not seemed to be possible, due to the ancient legacy of Buddhism effective on that region, the Brāhmanical religion adopted their Master, the Buddha into the Brāhmanical faith, and thus tried to mitigate the difference between the Brāhmanism and Buddhism.²¹ The Buddhists also accepted such authority of Brāhmanism due to their decaying state. Such mechanism was also responsible for the religious tolerances in Gayā. That is why, the famous Bodhi tree, where Buddha attained enlightenment, is considered as one of the most auspicious and sacred site by the Hindu devotees too alongside the Buddhists. In fact, Buddhism and Brahmanism both jointly weaved the religious scenario in Gayā, the land of mighty Viṣṇu and preaching sight of Lord Buddha.

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19. Barua, Benimadhab, *Gayā and Buddha-Gayā, Vol II*, Calcutta, 1934, pp -90-95

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21. Jaiswal, ibid, pp - 131

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