

## Conservation of Buddhist Cultural Heritage in India : A Need

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### Introduction

Dhammadāyādā me bhikkhave hotha mā hotha āmisadāyadā this pāli verse from dhammadāyāda sutta of majjhima nikāya is the Buddha's message for his followers. It means o monks be my spiritual heir & don't be my follower for the sake of material gain (material heir). The purpose of Buddhism is to attain highest bliss i.e. Nibbāna & help others to attain. Buddhist cultural heritage means spiritual practices as well as those things (monuments etc.) which are requisites for staying in piece & practice the way which leads to highest goal of Buddhist practice. We can classify Buddhist Cultural Heritage in India as (a) intangible (b) tangible. Intangible part covers Buddhism as a religion & its language, literature, philosophy, meditation techniques, rituals, doctrines, disciplines, art of living etc. these are some of aspects of Buddhism. Tangible part covers monuments, caves, temples; etc Scope of the subject is too vast so to limit my presentation. I am going to focus only on tangible aspects. According to Section 2(a) of The Ancient Monument And Archaeological Sites And Remains Act, 1958[1], the meaning of expression "ancient monument" includes any structure, erection or monument, or any tumulus or place of interment, or any cave, rock-sculpture, inscription or monolith, which is of historical, archaeological or artistic interest and which has been in existence for not less than one hundred years. Furthermore, it includes

- (i) The remains of an ancient monument,
- (ii) The site of an ancient monument,
- (iii) Such portion of land adjoining the site of an ancient monument as may be required for fencing or covering in or otherwise preserving such monument,
- (iv) The means of access to, and convenient inspection of, and ancient monument.

Buddhism was the main religion of India until 12th century A.D. Prince Siddhartha, who became Lord Buddha, lived in central North India from 566 to 486 BCE. After attaining

enlightenment at the age of thirty-five, he wandered about as a mendicant, teaching others. A community of celibate spiritual seekers soon gathered around him and accompanied him as he traveled about. Eventually, as the need arose, Buddha made rules of discipline for this community. The “monks” met four times a month to recite these rules and purify themselves. About twenty years after his enlightenment, Buddha started the custom of the monks staying in one place each year for a three-month rainy season retreat. The construction of Buddhist monasteries evolved from this custom a few years before passing away of the Buddha. Buddhism was spread not only in India but also in many other countries like Sri-lanka, Burma etc. Buddhism had got royal patronage from the ancient time. Many kings were follower of Buddhism. Emperor Ashoka was one of them. He was a greatest emperor of India. The Ashokan rock edicts are supposed to be one of the primary concrete evidences of the spread of Buddhism. The inscriptions on these edicts basically provide information about the spread of Buddhism in India and other places. According to the information provided on the edicts, many Buddhist monuments and temples were excavated and constructed during this time in order to promote this peaceful religion and make the world aware of Buddha’s ideals and philosophies. The rock edicts very clearly mention the efforts of Emperor Ashoka to spread Buddhism throughout the kingdom. In India now we have more than 5000 monuments registered as a national heritage. Most of the monuments of them are Buddhist which are historically as well as artistically very important. The majority of Buddhist monuments are found in Maharashtra state.

### **Government policy of cultural heritage**

Government policy of cultural heritage is undoubtedly good for conservation of cultural heritage. Under the following act cultural heritage is preserved until now in India.

- 1.The Indian Treasure Trove Act, 1878.
- 2.The Ancient Monuments Preservation Act, 1904.
- 3.The Antiquities (Export Control) Act, 1947
- 4.The Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Act, 1958
- 5.The Antiquities and Art Treasures Act, 1972, -forms the framework for further legislation.

The Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Act of 1958 came into force with effect from 29th August 1958. According to the Act, ancient and historical monuments, sculpture carvings and other like objects, archaeological sites and remains are protected and preserved. Archaeological excavations are regulated and are of National importance.

The Antiquities and Art Treasures Act of 1972 came into force with effect from 9th September 1972. According to the Act export trade in antiquities and art a treasure is regulated and smuggling and fraudulent dealings in antiquities and ancient monuments is prevented.

These legislations owe their legitimacy to the Article 49 Constitution of India[8],

On the similar lines the Constitution of India also provides through Entry 67 of list 1 of seventh schedule which says that Ancient and historical monuments and records, and archaeological sites and remains, [declared by or under law made by parliament] to be of national importance. This entry clearly confers a corresponding legislative power upon the parliament, Entry 12 of list 2[9] and Article. 51A[10].The Archaeological Survey of India (A.S.I.) is the main actor in the field of conservation of the monuments in India and is primarily responsible for upholding these above-mentioned laws. At present, the Archaeological Survey of India looks after more than 5,000 monuments ranging in date from prehistoric times to the 19th century, which also include 16 World Heritage Properties. Some of the main functions of the Archaeological Survey of India are as follows:

Maintenance, Conservation & Preservation of centrally protected monuments and sites.

Conducting archaeological exploration & excavations.

Chemical preservation of monuments and antiquarian remains.

Architectural survey of monuments.

Development of epigraphically researches.

Setting up and re-organization of site museums.

Training in Archaeology and creating awareness of the heritage of the country.

Implementation of the provisions of Antiquity and Art Treasure Act 1972.

The Archaeological Survey of India trying to give all possible attention, within the available funds, to all its major functions.

### **Problems in conserving Buddhist cultural heritage**

On one hand the main functions of ASI is very strong on paper but we hardly can see that functions implementation in practical. We can see a faulty method of preservation in some cases which even destroys some parts of cultural heritage. There was one article published in one of the leading news paper of India 'Times of India' dated 26th, October, 2009, page no.14, by Sharmila Ganesan-Ram. Which clearly describes how ASI is playing with ancient monuments? There are hundreds of ancient caves which do not have even basic facilities like drinking water, toilet, place for eat & take rest, security, steps to climb up to visit the caves

without whom it is almost impossible for a common man to visit those caves. Maintenance, Conservation & Preservation, architectural survey, chemical preservation etc all are ignored by ASI in many caves. But we can see budget for this kind of facilities on ASI record. Many rules which were made by ASI are not followed strictly by security if it is available there otherwise there is no question of following the rule. For example there is a rule of one should not bring eatables inside the caves but people ignore this rule completely & they bring as well as eat their food inside the caves in front of security. On the other hand people are also not good enough for the process of conserving cultural heritage in India. They look at this heritage as a picnic point & enjoy or entertainment place. They walk through with their eatables having their shoe on & throw the garbage anywhere after eating. They keep on writing sometimes even carving their names on chaitya & walls of the vihar. Some people have broke chaitya to build their houses with the bricks of chaitya. Many caves are situated at remote area's it is surrounded by forest & criminals hence those caves should be protected from criminal activities. There is major need of maintenance as well as proper implementation of objectives in order to preserve the Buddhist cultural heritage. ASI itself looks very passive for the process of conservation of cultural heritage. ASI as well as common people both is primarily responsible for the destruction of Buddhist cultural heritage in India

### **Problem of infiltration**

The Government order no.1764 dated 16th June 1992 in compliance with the Section 3 of -The Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Act, 1958, which says that Certain ancient monuments, etc., deemed to be of national importance, the Archaeological Survey of India has ordered that the constructions and mining near 100 meters around the National Monuments are prohibited and beyond 200 meters regulations for the construction and mining purposes has been done. According to ASI stand encroachments around and in the monuments are being dealt with a strict hand and for that purpose. The Unauthorized Occupants Act, 1972 has proved to be of a great help and the enactment has been used effectively in locations like Nandi Temple (90 houses), Hampi (200 houses) and Someshwara Temple (1 house).

On contrary we can see the continued illegal occupation of the most sacred and holiest place of the Buddhists and entire world, the mahabodhi mahavihar (the world heritage) at Buddha gaya in the bihar state. This is the place where Buddha got enlightenment. This temple was erected by emperor ashoka in 250 BC in the memory of Lord Buddha. Dr. Buchanan Hamilton a very well known archaeologist visited Buddha gaya mahabodhi mahavihar and he found that the vihar was in hopeless condition. Many inscriptions had been found during excavation in

Buddha Gaya to prove that throughout the ages, it was truly the Buddha Vihara .

Ven. Anagarik Dharmapala, was one of the greatest Buddhist Monk from Sri Lanka who took up the cause of handing over of Mahabodhi Mahavihar to Buddhists, visited Buddha Gaya in January 1891 along with Col. Oleot. He again came back in July 1891 along with four monks. Hindu Brahmin Priests (Mahants) assaulted all of them and the statue of Buddha was thrown away. The case went to Dist. Judge who said “ The temple was continuously and regularly been used as Buddhist place of worship by Buddhist pilgrims. No form of Hindu worship had been carried on inside the Mahabodhi temple and there is nothing to show that any such worship (Hindu worship) has been carried on for many centuries”. Justice McPherson of Calcutta High Court said “It is mentioned that the Mahabodhi Temple which is very ancient and very sacred to the Buddhists, was a Buddhists Temple. Although it has been in the possession of Hindu Mahants, it has never been converted into a Hindu Temple in the sense that Hindu idols have been enshrined or orthodox Hindu worship carried on there and that Buddhists pilgrims have had free access and liberty to worship in it “The proceedings of the case were published in all newspapers and the BuddhaGaya’s question became a live topic throughout India, Burma and other countries. Thus a strong public opinion was created in favor of the Buddhists Claim. In 1949, the Government of Bihar passed the Buddha Gaya Temple Act transferring the temple to a committee of Management consisting of four Buddhists and four Hindus with a Hindu District Magistrate of Gaya as the Chairman which ultimate means mangement of Mahavihar. Since the enactment of Temple Act in 1949, the Management has been in the hands of majority Hindu Brahmins who have nothing to do with the teaching of Buddha. Hindu Brahmins falsely claim that Buddha is an incarnation of a Hindu God Vishnu in order to destroy the holiest site of Buddhists. Hindu Brahmin Priests have been playing tricks to show to the world that Lord Buddha was a Hindu God and nothing else. It is established and accepted fact that Buddhism is the different independent religion which has nothing to do with the philosophy of God or incarnation of God. such things happens with many other Buddhist monuments like karla, bhaje, bedse, shelarwadi caves(pune), phirangai caves(maval), trirashmi caves(nashik), jogeshwari caves, (Mumbai), junnar caves, mandpeshwar caves, in maharashtra. All these Buddhist monuments are infiltrating by the Hindu followers knowingly or unknowingly. There is a Hindu temple of goddess named ekveera almost inside the karla caves. which is certainly not more than fifty years old. But the article published in lokmat by vijay surana dated 30th September 2008 which mentioned the ekveera temple is 3000 years old. Hindu people perform their rituals inside the caves. They even kill the innocent animals in the name of holy offerings made to the god. Similar things happened with all other Buddhist caves mentioned above & many other Buddhist monuments all over the India. All these Hindu gods are the contemporary

additions to the Buddhist monuments. This is illegal according to the act. The government is not following the act strictly in such regard. It is may be because of many social & political factors are involved in such cases.

### **Social movement to save Buddhist cultural heritage**

There are very few Buddhist & non Buddhist organizations working voluntarily for saving cultural heritages in India. Non Governmental Agencies like Indian National Trust for Art & Cultural Heritage (INTACH) and the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) trying to create awareness about cultural heritages in all over the country. There are some Buddhist organizations from all over the India trying to overcome this kind of problem under the leadership of a monk named most venerable arya nagarjuna surei sasai. His effort is highly important & valuable in this regard. He is trying to change the situation. There are some people or organizations also putting their efforts voluntarily to improve the situation. Indian Buddhists are trying to freed mahabodhi mahavihar, buddhgaya temple from the hands of Hindu's in order to preserve temple properly. But they all have many limitations so the process of conservation is very difficult task for them. According to me handing over management of mahabodhi temple to the Buddhists would not be final solution. But Bihar Government Act 1949, certainly not giving justice to the Indian Buddhist. The act should be change or to amend.

### **Conclusion**

Human interference is most affecting element to destroy the beauty & life of Buddhist heritages in India. People are absolutely unaware historical significances of the places. They carry out some irrelevant rituals and activities inside the Buddhist monuments or temples. Perhaps there is thousands of Buddhist sites in India who get abused in such way by millions people in India. Though constitution of India supports the conservation of sites as national concern, but in reality the picture is completely different. Because of varied social and cultural pressures the laws meant to preserve these heritages are not observed properly in India. These heritage sites have been trivialized merely to the picnic spots for urban, educated class of the country. If such kind of cultural damages are not dealt properly, certainly Buddhists in India will be facing the loss of their essence, identity and character very soon.