

Photo Essay



Walking in the Valley of the Buddha: Buddhist Revival and Tourism Development in Bihar

David Geary, *University of British Columbia*
with photos by Douglas Mason



On December 12th 2015 the Eleventh International Tipitaka chanting ceremony in Bodh Gaya reached its conclusion. Some 4,500 senior monks, nuns and lay persons from Cambodia, Thailand, Myanmar, Bangladesh, Lao P.D.R., Indonesia, Vietnam, Nepal, Malaysia and India gathered in the shade of the Bodhi Tree to recite the words of the Buddhist Pali canon. Organized into separate national stalls and amplified by speaker systems, for ten days the Mahabodhi temple complex resounded with the words of the Buddha, albeit separated by diverse linguistic intonations.

The Tipitaka chanting ceremony in Bodh Gaya is organized annually by the International Tipitaka Chanting Council (ITCC), along with many international devotees who share in making offerings. The primary sponsor is the Light of Buddhadharma International Foundation (LBDFI), a non-profit organization dedicated to the restoration of the Buddha sasana in India, promoting pilgrimage, educating monks and supporting Buddhist publications. Although founded by Tibetan Rinpoche Tarthang Tulku, much of the work is carried out by his daughter, Wangmo Dixey, Executive Director of LBDFI and now a regular fixture in Bodh Gaya during the winter season. Although I first met Wangmo in 2006 as a volunteer during the first International Tipitaka chanting ceremony, this was the first time I had the opportunity to participate in the events, in particular, the Buddha Carika, or Dhammayatra (Dharma Walk), organized on December 13, 2015 to the nearby Jethian Valley.

The Jethian Valley is 55 km east of Bodh Gaya, around 100 km southeast of Patna near the city of Rajgir between the Sone and Ganges rivers. This beautiful corridor of lush green jungle and rocky hills straddles the jurisdiction of the Nalanda and Gaya districts, and is believed to be one of the main routes taken by the Buddha during his 45 years of wandering and preaching in various parts of India. During the Buddha's time, Rajgir was the first capital of the Kingdom of Magadha, and according to legend, it is believed that

Corresponding author: David Geary, University of British Columbia, Community, Culture & Global Studies, david.geary@ubc.ca

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King Bimbisara had greeted the Buddha in the scenic Jethian Valley and welcomed the Tathagata to reside in the area of Venu Van (Bamboo Grove) where he gifted land for the Sangha's rain retreats. In the nearby Gridhra-kuta, ("Hill of the Vultures") it is also believed that Gautama Buddha delivered some of his most famous sermons and it was in the nearby Saptarni caves that the First Buddhist Council was held. Today Rajgir is a bustling town surrounded by low-lying hills and remains an important pilgrimage center that sits at the confluence of several religious traditions, most notably Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism.

The Dhammayatra started in the small village of Jethian, where several buses and vans from Bodh Gaya began to arrive in the early morning. In connection with the LBDFI and Nav Nalanda Mahavir (deemed university), a special sangha-dana had been organized in the village involving a group of 30 monks in multi-colored robes from different nationalities. The monks weaved their way through the rustic Jethian village receiving alms in their begging bowls from the local villagers. Following a decorative chalk pathway, the barefoot group of monks moved from door to door with slow and mindful steps. At one point during the walk, a Cambodian monk briefly called me aside and pulled out his tablet beneath his robes and asked if I would take some photos of him receiving the dana in his alms bowl.



Clearly the foreign Buddhist monks were honored by the generous village reception and took great pride in renewing sacred ties with the ancient site of Jethian at the

entrance of the valley. After weaving their way through the village the group settled in a grassy patch where the monks ate from their begging bowls and village women darted through the group of onlookers offering home-made sweets, such as the popular tilkput.

As the mid-day sun began to burn through the morning mist, a large event was organized on the nearby maidan as buses of pilgrims and visitors from surrounding villages continued to arrive. On the main dais was a congregation of Buddhist monastics and devotees from 10 countries, faculty members from Nav Nalanda Mahavihara and Nalanda International University, the Bodh Gaya Temple Management Committee, international scholars, heritage conservation specialists and community representatives from the village. Invoking the Dhamma and the historicism of the Buddha was a common thread through most of the speeches. Several speakers highlighted the rich cultural significance of the ancient Magadha region, and the importance of preserving the historic and religious integrity of the Jethian valley in an authentic way for current and future generations, including the importance of direct participation from villagers as stakeholders for people walking through the valley. For example, Wangmo Dixey from the Light of the Buddhadharma Foundation International said: “We have come here to follow the footsteps of the Blessed One (Buddha) and it was a highly joyous and sacred moment for us to see the sangha-dana being performed in the presence of the living Sangha... That we can work harmoniously together, even though we come from ten countries and share many different languages, is a testament to the unity of the Mahasangha, a shining example of our commitment to the teachings of the Buddha Bhagavat.”



Wangmo Dixey welcomes the sangha

Just after noon, amid chants of “Buddham, Sharanam, Ghachami”, over 500 pilgrims began the 15 km walk through the forest trail in the Jethian valley itself. I must admit, from friends who had helped organize the event, they had spoken about the “pristine environment” and “untouched” beauty of the valley which I always found suspicious coming from Bodh Gaya, where uncontrolled growth and piecemeal development has rapidly changed the rural landscape over the last two decades. Because the Jethian Valley is a protected forest reserve, much to my surprise, almost the entire valley corridor is covered in a blanket of jungle brush surrounded by beautiful rocky hills and cliffs far removed from the bustle of the nearby cities and roads. The remains of several ancient brick stupas and cave complexes could be seen along the walking path and were likely used by the Buddha and his disciples as mentioned in the travelogues of Chinese monk-scholar Xuanzang thirteen centuries earlier.

Like much of Bihar (the ‘land of vihara’), the valley is endowed with a rich history of cultural heritage that speaks to a confluence of religious beliefs and sensibilities. With the transcultural influence of Buddhism, there is no end to the possibilities of religious tourism within a context of intra-regional mobility and the rising economic power of many parts of Asia where Buddhism is prominent. Although there has been a significant revival of international Buddhism pilgrimage in India since the late 19th century, much of this archaeological and cultural heritage still remains on the periphery of Buddhist pilgrimage activity and will inevitably attract more and more visitors in the near future; something the state governments and local stakeholders are keen to exploit.



Prior to the rebranding of Bihar as “Blissful Bihar” following a number of social and economic reforms by the Chief Minister Nitish Kumar in 2005, India’s third most populous state has had a longstanding reputation as a place of corruption, caste violence and unrelenting poverty. Due to a paucity of public funds compounded by political corruption and institutional decay, several ancient Buddhist sites have remained at a standstill. In fact, one could argue that conservation by neglect and the slow rate of urbanization has been a virtue in these areas and has helped to preserve many of these ancient

Buddhist sites. An indirect partner in these conservation efforts has been the Naxalites, or Maoist groups that have been waging a guerilla war against landlords and corrupt state officials for decades. With the presence of the “red menace” in the surroundings, this has ensured few pilgrims, tourists and speculative looters enter these areas.

With the changing political landscape in Bihar, including support from the state Forest Department, the nearby scholarly establishments of Nav Nalanda Mahavihar and the new Nalanda International University, not to mention a Chief Minister who comes from the District, many of these peripheral sites are now on the radar of state officials and religious devotees looking to resacralize the memory and landscape of the Buddha. Following the first Dhammayatra in 2014, the state government allowed the installation of 15 nine-foot stupas to commemorate each kilometer and there were representatives of all of the route. These stupas are representative of the different Asian Buddhist countries involved in the organization of the event.



What was particularly special about the Dhammayatra for me was the opportunity to physically retrace the footsteps of the Buddha, and create a moving sangha for 15 km through this beautiful natural landscape. Over the course of the walk I had the opportunity to speak with several Buddhist monks, nuns and lay people, Indian and international scholars, media and other interested parties from diverse backgrounds and nationalities. Young Buddhist university and college students from Maharashtra shared stories of their experience as followers of Ambedkar; an Indonesian monk spoke to me about the beauty of Borobudur, and scholars from the Nalanda University talked about the exciting new developments and initiatives taking root.

The importance of undertaking pilgrimage and creating Buddhist heritage walks also appears to be striking a cord with the Indian state tourism department and plans are

underway, including support from the International Finance Corporation (World Bank Group) for strengthening what is called “pro-poor tourism development” in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. This strategy aligned with India’s 12th Five-Year Plan (2013-2018) is aimed at increasing net benefits for the poor and ensuring that tourism growth contributes to job creation, particularly for female and young workers. Part of what makes these Buddhist heritage walks attractive to the state is that some of the most iconic sites of Buddhist pilgrimage are also surrounded by some of India’s poorest communities.

So, rather than imposing a protectionist philosophy that requires a buffer zone and a clear separation between pilgrims and local communities, walking pilgrimage pathways can be used as a catalyst to create environmentally sensitive, low-impact tourism, that also helps to educate visitors and local community members about the tangible and intangible benefits of cultural heritage. It is becoming more widely accepted in the tourism industry, that protected parks and cultural landscapes can only survive if those people nearest to them are involved in management, receive value from their conservation, and benefit financially through job opportunities and thriving enterprise.

Like much of India’s multi-layered history and cultural landscape, reconnecting with a distant past requires some work of the imagination and reverence among its followers. In this process of renewal and resacralization of the Jethian Valley, there will be challenges along the way. One clear disconnect that was visible during the Dhammayatra walk was the large number of pilgrims who had no trouble tossing plastic water bottles and other refuse along the forest trail. There was also the strong military presence along the path to ensure the safety of pilgrims “walking for peace.” Thus, with an estimated 500,000 international visitors coming to Bodh Gaya every year, the number of pilgrims and visitors to these areas are likely to increase tenfold within the coming years. There is a shared responsibility among the international Buddhist community and local government to protect places like the Jethian Valley as a natural walking corridor that helps to preserve an ancient environment, encourages international pilgrims to spend more time on the ground visiting pilgrimage sites, and allows local people to directly benefit from such visitor numbers.

