THE BODHGAYA TEMPLE: WHOSE STRUCTURE IS IT?

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As one approaches the site of Bodhgaya, where Sakyamuni attained supreme Enlightenment and thereby became the Buddha, one monument towers above the relatively flat landscape. This is the Mahabodhi Temple, a structure that has come to symbolize the center of the religion that we now call Buddhism. More than any other site associated with the faith, it draws pilgrims from many parts of the globe as well as others who come to partake of a spirit that is associated with the place, perhaps to meditate, perhaps simply to draw in a tranquility that is far more palpable at Bodhgaya than at most of India’s other ancient sites, where tourists are invariably harassed by guides and souvenir sellers. Both are present at Bodhgaya, but they seem less obtrusive than they do elsewhere. Indeed the word tranquility dominates descriptions of the place, and that does not feel entirely misstated.

Tibetan monks, Buddhists from Sri Lanka and elsewhere in Southeast Asia, and even the scruffy Westerners give a flavor to Bodhgaya that distinguishes it from most of the other Indian sites. It allows a focus more on the people there than the stone monuments. That international flavor is reinforced by the monasteries built by Buddhists from other countries: a Burmese vihara, a Japanese one, and a Thai monastery, among many others, all in the architectural styles of the homeland. That alone reminds us of the importance of architecture in shaping identity. It, further, gives the sense of being-not-in-India while surely being there.

That foreign presence, even domination, of Bodhgaya raises a question today as it has in the past: Whose site is this? Does it belong to the Buddhists who worship there? And if so, which ones? Or does it belong to Hindus who worship there as part of the ceremony propitiating recently deceased relatives? Or, for that matter, does it belong to those who cherish monuments largely because of their historical importance, i.e. to tourists and scholars? Is Bodhgaya, in fact, as tranquil as it generally feels, or is that tranquility constructed, perhaps even to mask underlying tension?

A headline, from November 18, 2002 puts this in perspective: “Warning of Campaign if Buddhists are Ignored.” The article, referring
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1. Mahabodhi Temple, Bodhgaya, view from east. Photograph by Author.

2. Seated Buddha, Main Image of Mahabodhi Temple, Bodhgaya. Photograph by Author.