

## Mahabodhi Temple (India)

No 1056 rev

### Identification

<i>Nomination</i>	The Mahabodhi Temple Complex at Bodh Gaya
<i>Location</i>	State of Bihar, Eastern India
<i>State Party</i>	India
<i>Date</i>	7 July 2000 – 13 March 2002

### Justification by State Party

The Mahabodhi Temple Complex in Bodha Gaya (Buddha-Gaya) has outstanding universal importance as it is one of the most revered and sanctified places in the world. This is the hallowed spot where the ascetic Prince Siddhartha attained Enlightenment to become the Buddha, and thereafter pledged his life to deliver mankind from the cycle of suffering and rebirth. "Thus, on account of its association with the signal event in the Buddha's life, that of his attaining enlightenment and supreme wisdom, Bodh Gaya may be said to be the cradle of Buddhism. To the devout Buddhist there is no place of greater importance and sanctity". This observation made by Xuanzang in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, when he visited the region, is valid even today.

The Buddha's understanding of the truth of human existence on earth and the path which he enunciated not only transformed the lives of thousands in his lifetime but that of millions in the world ever since. Buddhist population ranks fourth, constituting 6% of the world's population, after Christians (33%), Muslims (19.6%), and Hindus (12.8%). The Buddha is not only deeply revered by Buddhists the world over, but is universally respected by people of different religions for the fine message of compassion and peace which he enunciated. Every year millions of people throng to the Mahabodhi Temple at Bodh Gaya which commemorates the spot of his enlightenment.

The significant sites related to the life of the Buddha include Lumbini, which is already in the World Heritage List, *Bodh Gaya*, where he attained the supreme and perfect insight, *Sarnath*, where he made his first sermon after Enlightenment, and *Kusinagar*, where he passed away.

The Mahabodhi Temple is a living monument where people from all over the world even today throng to offer their reverential prayers to the Buddha. The tradition of worship here has continued over the centuries, as is recorded in the pillar edicts of Asoka and is seen depicted in the sculpture in Sanchi and Bharhut, as well as reflected in the accounts by

various travellers over the course of centuries, including the Chinese travellers of the 4<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries. The site itself is a unique and exceptional testimony of the importance given to this place of pilgrimage by people from different countries through the passage of many centuries.

It also represents a singular example of the efforts of people of different countries to preserve and conserve an invaluable legacy through the course of many centuries. The history of this temple is an outstanding reflection of the devotion of rulers and lay persons of Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and India, who have contributed over the centuries to repair and save it for posterity.

The Mahabodhi Temple is, above all, a unique property of cultural and archaeological significance. There is no other extant grand structural property of its kind in the Indian sub-continent belonging to this period of antiquity, ie the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> century AD. Furthermore, the temple is remarkably well preserved and marks a high point of architectural achievement for its times. It is noteworthy to observe that the architecture and design of the Temple has remained essentially unaltered since the time when it was built.

In the context of philosophical and cultural history, the Mahabodhi Temple Complex is of great relevance as it marks the most important event in the life of Buddha, an event that was to change the shape of human thought and belief. Bodh Gaya is the very cradle of Buddhism and compares as such with Jerusalem and Mecca, which are themselves the cradles of two great religions of the world.

#### Criterion vi

The grand 50m high Mahabodhi Temple of the 5<sup>th</sup>–6<sup>th</sup> centuries is of immense importance, being one of the earliest temple constructions existing in the Indian sub-continent. It is one of the few representations of the architectural genius of the Indian people in constructing fully developed brick temples in that era.

#### Criterion i

The Mahabodhi Temple is also important as it exhibits an important phase in the development of architecture. It is one of the very few well represented temple structures, and also the grandest one from a period of history when numerous such brick structures would have been built all over India. As such, it bears an exceptional testimony to a cultural tradition and to the prevalent forms of architecture in the late Gupta period (the "Golden Age" of Indian culture).

#### Criteria ii and iii

The sculpted stone balustrades (partly seen on the site and partly preserved in the nearby Archaeological Museum) are an outstanding example of the art and architecture of the period of Emperor Asoka (3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE) and soon thereafter. These balustrades also present some of the oldest sculptural reliefs found in the country. As there are few remnants of such balustrades, which were a very important feature of early Buddhist monuments of that time, these are of great importance.

#### Criterion iv

### Category of property

In terms of the categories of cultural property set out in Article 1 of the 1972 World Heritage Convention, this is a *monument*.

## History and Description

### History

The Mahabodhi Temple in Bodh Gaya is the sacred place where Buddha (566–486 BCE), while seated under the Bodhi Tree, attained Enlightenment in 531 at the age of 35. Emperor Asoka made a pilgrimage to this spot around 260 BCE and built the first temple at the site of the Bodhi Tree, under which Buddha had meditated. This included a balustrade around the Tree and a small temple near it. He offered a *Vajrasana* (Diamond Throne), placed in the middle of the temple, at the place where Buddha was believed to have been sitting. The *Vajrasana* was unearthed during the excavations in 1863 and 1881. The clay plaque in Patna Museum has inscriptions of the 1st–2nd centuries CE showing that the Asoka temple had been replaced by a new temple. The Hindus built the stone balustrade with carvings of the image of the sun god around the new temple. It seems that many additions and renovations to the complex were made in the 2nd century CE.

The earliest historical account of the Mahabodhi Temple is by the Chinese traveller Faxian in 404–5 CE. The main temple at the site and the Bodhi Tree are briefly mentioned in his account. According to him, a great pagoda was built on all the four important sites in the life of Buddha. In 637 CE, when another Chinese traveller, Xuanzang, came to the city of Bodh Gaya, he found the Bodhi Tree surrounded by strong walls. Within the walls there was the grand Mahabodhi temple, 160ft (50m) tall, and a large fine sanctuary. He mentions the bluish bricks, plaster, niches containing gilded statues of the Buddha, and many other details. In this period, the porch, the corner tower, and the high plinth were added to the main temple. Various parts of the existing temple have been dated, such as the balustrades (3rd or 1st century BCE) and the temple itself, which is from 450 or the 6th century CE.

There is only limited information about the repairs that took place from the 7th to 11th centuries, but it appears that extensive works must have been made by the Burmese in the 11th century. Other repairs are recorded in the 12th century. In the centuries following the Muslim conquest in the 13th century, the Mahabodhi Temple was deserted and gradually started falling into ruins. In the 19th century the Burmese kings started making repairs. The works were continued by the British in 1880–84. In 1949 the temple was protected by the Bodh Gaya Temple Act and a restoration campaign was carried out in 1953–56, to be continued with further improvements in the following decades.

### Description

The Mahabodhi Temple Complex is located in the very heart of the city of Bodh Gaya. The site proposed for inscription covers an area of 12 acres (c 4.8ha), consisting of the main temple and six sacred places within an enclosed area, and a seventh one, the Lotus Pond, just outside the enclosure to the south. Both the temple area and the Lotus Pond are surrounded by circulating passages at two or three levels. Surrounding the temple area, to the east, there is a Shiva temple under the control of a *Mahant*. The land to the south of the Temple Complex is the lowest in level and the Niranjana river flows in this area. In the north are some shops built by the District Administration. A hotel is under construction in the south-west corner of the Temple Complex. To the west, beyond the road, there is a mosque

which, owing to the high ground and its height, competes with the main temple of the Temple Complex.

The Temple is enclosed by a boundary wall with an average height of 11m. The area of the ensemble is 5m below the level of the surrounding land. From the east a flight of steps leads down through a long central path to the main temple and the surrounding area. Along this path there are significant places associated with events that immediately followed the Buddha's Enlightenment, together with votive *stupas* and shrines.

The most important of the sacred places is the giant Bodhi Tree (*Ficus religiosa*, known in India as the peepal tree). This tree is to the west of the main temple and is supposed to be a direct descendant of the original Bodhi Tree under which Buddha spent his FIRST WEEK and where he had his Enlightenment. To the north of the central path, on a raised area, is the *Animeshlochana Chaitya* (prayer hall) where Buddha is believed to have spent the SECOND WEEK. Buddha spent the THIRD WEEK walking eighteen paces back and forth in an area called *Ratnachakrama* (the Jewelled Ambulatory), which lies near the north wall of the main temple. Raised stone lotuses carved on a platform mark his steps. The spot where he spent the FOURTH WEEK is *Ratmaghar Chaitya*, located to the north-east near the enclosure wall. Immediately after the steps of the east entrance on the central path there is a pillar which marks the site of the *Ajapala Nigrodh* Tree, under which Buddha meditated during his FIFTH WEEK, answering the queries of Brahmans. He spent the SIXTH WEEK next to the Lotus Pond to the south of the enclosure, and the SEVENTH WEEK was spent under the *Rajyatana* Tree, to the south-east of the main temple, currently marked by a tree.

The MAIN TEMPLE, an ancient structure (5th–6th centuries CE), is 50m high and built in the classical style of Indian temple architecture. It has a low basement with mouldings decorated with honeysuckle and geese design. Above this is a series of recessed niches containing images of Buddha in seated or standing position with various gestures. Further above there are mouldings and *chaitya* niches, and then the curvilinear *shikhara* or tower of the temple surmounted by *amalaka* and *kalasha* (architectural features in the tradition of Indian temples). At the four corners of the parapet of the temple are four statues of Buddha in small shrine chambers. A small tower is built above each of these shrines.

The temple has entrances from the east and from the north. It seems that the east entrance was constructed later; at the present time it is the main one. Although the temple area is 5m below the surrounding land, photographs of 1863 show the main Temple on a high platform with an archway leading to it. The Temple faces east (the direction faced by Buddha while meditating) and consists of a small forecourt in the east with niches on either side containing statues of Buddha. A doorway leads into a small hall, beyond which lies the sanctum, which contains a gilded statue of the seated Buddha (over 5ft high) holding earth as witness to his achieved Enlightenment. Above the sanctum is the main hall with a shrine containing a statue of Buddha, where senior monks gather to meditate.

Next to the Bodhi Tree there is a place with a statue of Buddha that stands on a part of the polished sandstone *Vajrasana* (the Diamond Throne), originally installed by Emperor Asoka to mark the spot where Buddha sat and meditated. A sandstone balustrade once encircled this site

under the Bodhi Tree, but only a few of the original pillars of the balustrade are still *in situ*; they contain carvings of sculpted human faces, animals, and decorative details. More granite pillars were added to enlarge the area in the 5th–6th centuries CE.

Further up the central path towards the main temple to the south is a small shrine with a standing Buddha in the back and with the footprints (*Padas*) of Buddha carved on black stone, dating from the 3rd century BCE, when Emperor Asoka declared Buddhism to be the official religion of the state and installed thousands of such footprint stones all over his kingdom. The gateway to the Temple, which is on the central path, was also originally built by this Emperor, but was later rebuilt. Further on the path towards the main temple is a building which houses several statues of Buddha and Bodhisattvas. Opposite this building is a memorial to a Hindu *Mahant* who had lived on this site during the 15th and 16th centuries. To the south of the pathway is a cluster of votive *stupas* built by kings, princes, noblemen, and lay people. They vary in shape and size, from the simplest to the most sumptuous ones.

## Management and Protection

### *Legal status*

The Mahabodhi Temple is the property of the State Government of Bihar. On the basis of the Bodh Gaya Temple Act of 1949, the State Government is responsible for the protection, management, and monitoring of the Temple and its properties. The Act also makes provision for the Bodh Gaya Temple Management Committee (BTMC) and an Advisory Board by the Governor of Bihar, consisting of 20–25 members, half of them being from foreign Buddhist countries. There is a legal land act to protect the Temple's land from illegal constructions. All finds in the area are protected by the Treasure Trove Act of 1878. The Temple is also protected by the Gaya Regional Development Authority (GRDA), which is responsible for the planned development of Bodh Gaya town and is advised by BTMC in matters relating to the Temple and its environs.

### *Management*

The Bodh Gaya Temple Management Committee (BTMC), constituted in 1949, is the executive body for the management of the site; it works under the supervision, direction, and control of the State Government of Bihar. The Temple Complex is guarded by its own staff and the State Police collaborates in its protection. BTMC keeps a systematic and updated inventory of all the properties of the temple. There is no formal property management plan for the Temple complex, but the coordination of the required initiatives is taken care of by BTMC.

The sources of finance for the Temple come mainly from donations. The Committee raises funds by renting property and other means, which are sufficient for the management and maintenance of the site. For conservation work, expertise is given by various ministries.

The BTMC is expected to make provision for the better management of the Bodh Gaya Temple and properties appertaining to it. The nomination document indicates that there is no "property management plan" for the site, but there are plans and projects related to the redevelopment and the

presentation of the Temple Complex and its setting. Basic monitoring and documentation of the buildings in the temple complex are carried out periodically. It is noted that the parking area has recently been moved away from the Temple Complex and there are plans to decongest the temple area.

In 1987 the conservation status of the Temple was examined by the National Research Laboratory for Conservation. In 1997 the Temple Advisory Board and the BTMC carried out a detailed survey of the site and drew up a Master Plan for the development of the Temple Complex and the area around the Temple, proposing to make a Meditation Park, a Museum of Buddhism, and a Reception and Information Centre. The plan further proposes to recreate the landscape of the area as it would have appeared in ancient times, together with lawns, flower beds, deer park, and meditation areas.

In 1999, at the request of BTMC, the Patna Circle of the Archaeological Survey of India has prepared an evaluation for a conservation project for the Temple Complex for the next two years. The implementation of the project has initiated in February 2002 under the supervision of the Archaeological Survey of India. The State Archaeology Department of Bihar has also prepared a project for the excavation and presentation of the area, uncovering the ancient city, and the sanctuaries and monasteries built by foreign kings over the centuries. The project aims at recreating the area to match a depiction on a terracotta plaque found in the excavations of Pataliputra (the capital city of Bihar).

The population of Bodh Gaya town where the Temple Complex is located was 16,000 in 1991, but this figure is estimated to have doubled by 2001. Over the years foreign countries have acquired land to build temples, monasteries, and residential accommodation for their visiting pilgrims in the buffer zone of the Temple. There is pressure from construction activity in the vicinity of the Temple area at the present time. This is likely to grow owing to further development of the site and the increase in the number of visitors, although the heights of buildings are limited within 2km distance from the Temple area. All this will put particular pressure on development in the town and its suburbs in the near future.

The Government of India and the State Government of Bihar are promoting the site through their Departments of Tourism. An annual celebration of the Buddhist legacy is held by the Department of Tourism in Mahabodhi and in other important Buddhist sites. There are plans to illuminate the approach to the Mahabodhi Temple Complex. A sound and light show on the life of Buddha and the events at this historic site is also under preparation at the behest of the BTMC. There are currently some 400,000 visitors per year (30% foreign and 70% domestic). During November to February the average is 2000 visitors per day, but during special festivities there have been as many as 60,000 visitors in one day.

As part of the general scheme, the roads have been improved to connect the capital city of Bihar to Bodh Gaya and to other Buddhist sites in Bihar. The Central and State Governments propose to connect all Buddhist sites through tourist circuits developed to promote these sites. Construction of an airport near the site is foreseen by the Ministry of Civil Aviation. A scheme has also been proposed by an NGO for the construction of the tallest statue in the world, a Buddha 152.4 m high.

## Conservation and Authenticity

### *Conservation history*

After the long period of abandonment, the temple complex was in a poor state and was extensively restored in the 19th century, first by the Burmese and then by the British (1880–84). These works were based on existing evidence and no new features are reported to have been added. The front pavilion of the temple was in ruins and it was rebuilt on the basis of a stone model found at the Temple.

The next significant work on the site was undertaken after the approval of the Bodha Gaya Temple Act in 1949. The repair and development works were made under the supervision of BTMC (1953–56), including the inner and outer pathways around the Temple Complex and the excavation of the Lotus Pond, which was provided with balustrades. Other works have been carried out from the 1960s onwards, including the boundary wall, transforming the upper shrine area into a meditation hall, and adding other facilities.

At present the site is experiencing strong pressures from increasing tourism and pilgrimage. This has been accompanied by various improvement works, and there are plans for carrying out excavations, improving the presentation of the Temple, and the construction of more visitor facilities in the neighbourhood.

### *Authenticity and integrity*

The belief that Buddha has attained Enlightenment in this particular place has been confirmed by tradition. This has been documented since the time of Emperor Asoka, who erected a memorial column and built the first temple here in 260 BCE.

Parts of the present temple complex date from different periods. The main part of the temple is recorded from about the 6th century, but it has undergone various repairs and renovation works since then. Having suffered from long abandonment, it was extensively restored in the 19th century, and more works were carried out in the second half of the 20th century. Nevertheless, the temple is considered to be the oldest and best preserved example of brick architecture in India from this particular period. Even though the structure has suffered from neglect and repairs in various periods, it has retained its essential features intact.

## Evaluation

### *Action by ICOMOS*

The nomination was first presented for evaluation in 2001. An ICOMOS expert mission visited the property in January 2001. While recognizing the outstanding universal significance of the Mahabodhi Temple, ICOMOS recommended that further consideration of this nomination be *deferred*. The State Party was requested to provide precise maps of the temple site and the surrounding built environment, with a clear indication of the proposed perimeters of the core area and the buffer zone. Furthermore, the State Party was requested to provide more details of the suggested plans for development and presentation, indicating the expected impact on the spiritual and historical values of the site. These requirements have now been satisfied.

### *Qualities*

The outstanding universal value of the Mahabodhi Temple Complex in Bodh Gaya lies in its direct association with the life of the Lord Buddha, as one of four sites: Lumbini, the Birthplace of the Lord Buddha, in Nepal (inscribed 1997: criteria iii, vi); Bodh Gaya, where he attained the supreme and perfect insight; Sarnath, where Buddha preached his first sermon after Enlightenment; and Kusinagar, where he died (criterion vi).

The area of the Mahabodhi Temple is an ancient site which has great archaeological significance in respect of the events associated with the time Buddha spent there, as well as documenting the evolving worship, particularly since the 3rd century BCE, when Emperor Asoka built the first temple, the balustrades, and the memorial column (criterion iii). The site has had significant influence in the development of brick architecture over the centuries (criterion ii).

The present Temple is dated to the 5th or 6th century CE and, although it has been subject to various repairs and partial reconstruction, it remains an exceptional event of the history of architecture. It is considered to be one of the earliest temple constructions in India still standing and one of the few built entirely in brick that remain from the late Gupta period. The sculpted stone balustrades are an outstanding example from the period of Emperor Asoka and his successors, exhibiting some of the oldest sculptural reliefs found in the country (criteria iv).

### *Comparative analysis*

The religious significance of the Mahabodhi Temple for Buddhism is outstanding, and comparable particularly with Lumbini, the Birth Place of the Lord Buddha. The site has also been compared with equivalent sites related to other religions, such as Jerusalem and Mecca. As a place of worship the site represents a continuous tradition of philosophical thought and human values since the time of Buddha.

The Mahabodhi Temple is significant as an exceptional example of an early Buddhist structural temple still standing today. There are a few structural temples of the 5th–6th centuries CE in India, but the Mahabodhi Temple is considered to be the best preserved, the largest, and the most imposing.

### *ICOMOS recommendations for future action*

Taking note of the ambitious initiatives for the presentation of the site, providing facilities for visitors, and the development of the area as a whole, the town, and even the entire region, ICOMOS wishes to draw the attention of the responsible authorities on the need to continuously monitor the impact that such challenges may have on the religious and spiritual significance of the place.

## Brief description

The Mahabodhi Temple Complex is one of the four holy sites related to the life of the Lord Buddha, and particularly to the attainment of Enlightenment. The first temple was built by Emperor Asoka in the 3rd century BCE, and the present temple dates from the 5th or 6th centuries CE. It is one of the earliest Buddhist structural temples still standing

in India, and one of the few built entirely in brick from the late Gupta period.

### **Statement of Significance**

The outstanding universal significance of the Mahabodhi Temple complex in Bodha Gaya is in its direct association with one of the most important moments in the life of the Lord Buddha, the moment when Prince Siddhartha attained Enlightenment and became Buddha. The site provides exceptional records for the life of the Buddha, and the subsequent worship from the time of Emperor Asoka who built the first temple in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE. The current building represents an exceptional example of early brick architecture in India.

### **ICOMOS Recommendation**

That the site be inscribed on the World Heritage List on the basis of *criteria ii, iii, iv and vi* :

**Criterion ii** The Mahabodhi Temple, one of the few surviving examples of early brick structures in India, has had significant influence in the development of architecture over the centuries.

**Criterion iii** The site of the Mahabodhi Temple provides exceptional records for the events associated with the life of Buddha and subsequent worship, particularly since Emperor Asoka built the first temple, the balustrades, and the memorial column.

**Criterion iv** The present Temple is one of the earliest and most imposing structures built entirely in brick from the late Gupta period. The sculpted stone balustrades are an outstanding early example of sculptural reliefs in stone.

**Criterion vi** The Mahabodhi Temple Complex in Bodh Gaya has direct association with the life of the Lord Buddha, being the place where He attained the supreme and perfect insight.

ICOMOS, March 2002