

Tour report of Hon'ble Vice Chairperson
Dr.H.T.Sangliana's visit to Bodhgaya
on 20th and 21st October, 2011.

20.10.2011 (Thursday)

I departed from New Delhi railway station at 5:00 PM by Kolkata Rajdhani (train no.12302).

21.10.2011(Friday)

5:00 AM: I arrived at Gaya railway station.

I was received by Shri S.K.Mishra, Deputy Collector/Executive Officer of Gaya along with some of the staff of the Bodhgaya Temple Management Committee (BTMC).

I was provided police escort throughout the one day visit of Bodhgaya.

I travelled for about 30 minutes by car to the guest house at Bodhgaya.

7:30 AM: Breakfast

8:00 AM: I departed to the Bodhgaya temple premise. I was given a guided tour by the Chief Monk of the temple.

9:00 AM: Meeting at the BTMC.

I had a meeting with members of the BTMC, along with the Deputy Collector of Bodhgaya. About 20 Buddhist monks belonging to the International Buddhist Council (IBC) represented their respective monasteries situated in Bodhgaya.

The Chief Monk of the Bodhgaya temple made the welcome address. He exuded confidence that as the Hon'ble Vice Chairman of the NCM, I would play a significant role in helping to allay the apprehensions and resolve the long standing concerns of all the 42 monasteries located in Bodhgaya.

I then addressed the delegates and touched upon what was on everybody's mind namely the management of Bodhgaya temple by Buddhists which was considered to be a legitimate democratic demand of the Buddhist community at Bodhgaya and outside.

I then stated that there was however a great advantage in having a serving bureaucrat, especially somebody at the rank of the District Magistrate of Gaya as the presiding officer of the BTMC. I told them that having retired as a

bureaucrat myself, I am well aware of the possible advantages of such an arrangement.

I then touched upon the contentious clause that states “The District Magistrate of Gaya shall be the ex-officio Chairman of the BTMC: Provided that the State Government shall nominate a Hindu as Chairman of the Committee for the period during which the DM of Gaya is non-Hindu.” (Point 3; Secs. 4-6; Appendix 4; Bodh Gaya Temple Act, 1949)

I expressed clearly that I am not in favour of the insistence on a Hindu Chairman for the BTMC. I said that it would have been better to just say DM of Gaya without mention of religion. I said that now since the Bihar State elections were over, the NCM would meet with the CM of Bihar to raise the need to amend such a clause in the Bodhgaya Temple Act.

I then sought the response of the delegates.

Shri Priya Pal Bhikkhu from Tripura who represented the Chakma temple of Bodhgaya spoke on behalf of all the Buddhist delegates and made the following points which were reinforced by the others:

- Referring back to the contentious clause that was originally raised by me, they noted that it was silent on whether a Buddhist District Magistrate would be allowed to function as the ex-officio chairman of the BTMC.
- The Government of India’s commitment to the UN General Assembly in 1992, the NCM Act, the Bihar Minority Commission Act and even the Article 26 of the Indian constitution are all violated by the existence of the Bodhgaya Temple Act. Every religious community should have the right to manage their own religious institutions they opined.
- They were curious to know if there had been any response that was received by the NCM for its letters that were sent by the former Secretary Shri M.K.Khanna and the former Chairman Shri M.S.Querishi to the PMO and CM of Bihar respectively.
- The need for the Electricity board to revise its policy of charging the monasteries exorbitant amounts, each running into lakhs of rupees, failing which they are threatened with imminent disconnection of their electric connections. The monasteries were being charged commercial

rates for their electric usage similar to the luxury hotels. They feel that the State Government should consider reverting to the policy of charging the monasteries with a unique tariff (DS3) which was a middle ground between the domestic and commercial tariff. This was the policy of the electricity board earlier, which all the monasteries were happy to abide by. They don't want their religious monasteries that provide services to the devotees to be treated on the same footing as hotels; as commercial entities rather than religious ones. They said that they were not charging the devotees anything for the use of the facilities at the monasteries.

- The monasteries are carrying out various social welfare activities like educational institutions, health units etc and therefore want to be looked upon as charitable entities by the administration rather than as commercial bodies.
- They referred to the proposed Master Plan for Bodhgaya. They said that the IBC were not being consulted in the matter.
- Absence of Buddhist member in the Bihar Minority Commission.
- The voices of the Buddhist activists who raise the issues of the community through peaceful demonstrations are crushed.
- The Great Holy Land Monastery handed over copies of earlier written representations made by them and also provided a CD that showed the unsympathetic demolition of parts of their monastery by the administration.
- They are never consulted or invited to meetings of the BTMC though there is a provision for the presence of special invitees at these meetings.
- There is a need for separate electric transformers near some monasteries.
- Improvement of footpath and street lights etc near the monasteries.
- Absence of gazette notification regarding the proposed Master Plan for Bodhgaya and areas surrounding the main temple.
- More clarity required on restrictions imposed upon the monasteries in the inner core area surrounding the main temple from conducting any construction activities.
- There should be representatives from the IBC in the Nagar Panchayat.

- ATR on the issues raised before the Buddhist Member of the NCM who visited Bodhgaya earlier.

I acknowledged the legitimacy of several of these demands. I sought that a written summary of these points be sent to me for further necessary action.

I also pointed out the need for economy measures to be taken to prevent over-usage and wastage of electric power.

I underlined the need for good and effective maintenance of electric and sanitary appliances to prevent wastage of electricity and water.

I agreed that representatives of the Buddhist monasteries and members of the IBC must be involved in the consultation process by the District administration and by the BTMC.

I also advised the Executive officer to consider matters that concern the monasteries sympathetically. Once the monasteries submitted their construction plans based on existing building bye-laws, a spot inspection should be performed rather than disapproving from a distance.

The meeting ended with a vote of thanks by Dr.Radhakrishna Mishra, Member of the BTMC. He avowed that the BTMC would support every effort of the monasteries in serving the devotees and in upholding the honour of the main temple.

11:00 AM

I then revisited the main temple area to see the linga, stupas and statues which are of particular importance to the Hindu community that are present therein.

I was shown a circular stone area at the ground level within the main temple where a Shivaling is believed to have once stood above the ground level. I also noticed a relatively small area of about 60' x 25' adjacent to the main temple that housed a few Hindu deities. I didn't witness much religious activity there and not many Hindu devotees were seen visiting or paying obeisance in that area.

I also pointed out to the BTMC staff, the places that required minor repair works and I suggested to get them repaired as they don't seem to recover

official approval of the ASI which is reported to be in-charge of the restoration works. I was rather surprised to note that such permission had not been given by the ASI under the pretext that no such alteration should be made even though it is only a matter of plastering the broken walls, pillars, pavement and footpath where potholes were seen. In fact the entire look of the area was shabby and unpleasant even for the foreign visitors who may be thinking that it was normal Indian standard of maintenance even for such a world-famed religious site.

A lot of restoration and repair work need to be undertaken at the temple and its surroundings in consultation with the Archaeological Survey of India as the Main temple was declared as a UNESCO world heritage site in 2002.

I suggested to the Deputy Collector and the BTMC members that a line be drawn on both sides of the way leading to the main entrance of the temple in order to streamline hawkers. I suggested to confine beggars to a particular area and restrained from crossing those lines, so that the devotees are not obstructed or intruded upon in any way.

Noticing the indiscriminate littering of the place, I suggested that a few large "USE ME" bins be installed to throw trash.

I also met with several devotees including foreigners to get their views on how the facilities at the temple premise could be improved.

Some of their suggestions are as under:

- An American devotee felt that a guide map with an index that indicates all the important points be placed at the entrance of the main temple premises so as to enable them to easily navigate the area and select what to see.
- An Indonesian group that were meditating within the main temple premises pointed out the hopeless condition of the toilet facilities especially for women tourists.

They complained about innumerable insects that caused great trouble to women in the toilet area.

- Some other foreign tourists said that they felt harassed by the beggars though they felt distressed at the plight of the begging children. They felt that they shouldn't be allowed to intrude into the precious religious experience in pursuit of which they had travelled all the way to India.

12:15 PM: I was shown a multimedia presentation on the life, journey, enlightenment, teachings and noble truths of the Buddha.

The DM happened to be in New Delhi attending some official works and hence could not be present during the visit.

I feel that ASI should frequently interact with the BTMC so as to improve the appearance and maintenance of the shrines as a whole. Distance management would never do good.

9:30 PM: I departed for Gaya railway station

10:40 PM: I boarded Kolkata Rajdhani (12301) for New Delhi

21.10.2011 (Saturday)

10:00AM: I arrived at the New Delhi railway station.

P.S. This tour report may be sent to the BTMC and the ASI for necessary action.

(Dr. H.T.Sangliana)

3.11.2011