

Co-existence of Religions in Gaya (300 BCE – 1200 CE): An Epigraphic Study

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The modern district of Gaya lies in Bihar. The modern boundaries of Gaya district have Nawada in the east Aurangabad in the west Jehanabad in the north and Jharkhand in the south. The district of Gaya consists of two most important places, Gaya and Bodhgaya. The landscape of Gaya has two most important rivers, Niranjana River and Phalgu River. The temple of Visnupada is located on the banks of Phalgu River and the temple of Mahabodhi is located on the banks of Niranjana River. The region of Gaya enjoys a significant space in the history writings, to be specific in the history, which is dated between 600BCE to 1200CE. The Visnupada temple which is located in the Gaya town is the place where Hindus offer pinda dana to their ancestors. The Mahabodhi temple which is located in Bodhgaya, is on the banks of Niranjana River. It is the place where Gautama Buddha attained enlightenment.

Buddhism was one of the most important religions of India from 600BCE to 1200CE. Hence, Bodhgaya enjoys a prominent seat in the writings of History of Buddhism. The pinda dana or the Brahmanical tradition of the region of Gaya have not been enquired much in the Historical writings. Hence, the region of Gaya from the religious perspective of Brahmanical tradition has not been studied much. The secondary writings on the religion of the Gaya region presents a lop sided view. Buddhism and the region of Gaya seem to be synonymous. The linear development of religions in the region of Gaya has been emphasized in the secondary writings. The linear development model argues that the religion of Buddhism was followed by Brahmanism. Hence, the term decline of Buddhism and revival of Brahmanism is often written in the secondary writings of history which deals with the history of religion in the region of Gaya.

The works of Mitra¹, Madhukar and Sahay², Barua³, Leshko⁴, Lawson⁵, Thakurta⁶, Sinha⁷, Diwakar⁸, Jamuar⁹, Patil¹⁰, Kuraishi¹¹ and Roy Choudhary¹² have presented the story of Bodhgaya in the light of Buddhism. Paul¹³ has written in her article about the Visnupada temple of Gaya and Vidyarthi¹⁴ has presented the anthropological study of Brahmanical religion of Gaya. All the above historians have predominantly tried to establish the identity of the region of Gaya as a Buddhist site, except the work of Paul and Vidyarthi.

A qualitative analysis of inscriptions found in the region of Gaya presents an interesting and a contrast picture of the religious development in Gaya, which is in contradiction to the secondary writings available for the region of Gaya. The list of inscriptions is given below.

| S. No. | Name of the Inscriptions | Recordings | Chronology | Miscellaneous | References |
|--------|--|--|--|--|---|
| 1. | Barabar hill cave inscription of Asoka. | Dedication of the cave by raja Piyadasi for the use of Ajaivika sect. | 300 BCE | One of the inscriptions found on the eastern side of the entrance door of Sudama cave and the other one found on the right hand wall of the entrance of the Visva Jhopri cave. | CII, vol. I, p.30 |
| 2 | Nagarjuni hill cave inscription of Dasratha. | Cave dedicated for the use of the Ajaivika sect. | Last quarter of 300BCE. | Carved on the left hand side of the porch of the Vipaya cave. | CII, vol. I, p.31 |
| 3 | Barabar hill cave inscription. | Mentions the word Gorathagiri. | 300BCE on the basis of palaeography. | On the surface of the granite rock of the Barabar hill cave. | JBORS, vol. I, p. 163-164 |
| 4 | Bodhgaya railing inscription. | Gift of noble lady Kurangi, who is a daughter of Jiva and sister in-law of Indragni- mitram. | 200BCE.-100 BCE basis of palaeography. | Carved on the 15 upright pillars and two coping stones of sand stone railing which enclosed Mahabodhi temple of Bodhgaya. | B. M. Barua, Gaya and Bodhgaya, Book III, p. 67 |
| 5 | Bodhgaya railing | Gift of Srma, a female donor from the Indragni- mitram Prasada. | 200BCE-100 BCE on the | Carved on the mutilated upright pillar of the sand stone | B. M. Barua, Gaya and |

¹ R.L.Mitra, Bodhgaya: The Hermitage of Sakyamuni, Calcutta, Bengal Secretariat Press, 1878.

² Madhukar and Sahay, Bodhgaya: The Holy Pilgrimage of Buddhism, Patna, 1998.

³ B.M.Barua, Gaya and Bodhgaya, Calcutta Indian Research Institute, Calcutta, 1934.

⁴ J.Leshko, 'Pilgrimage and the evidence of Bodhgaya image', in Van Kooji and H.V.Veere(ed.), Function and Meaning in Buddhist Art, Groningen, 1995.

⁵ Lawson, 'Votive Objects from Bodhgaya', in J. Leshko, Bodhgaya: The Site of Enlightenment, Marg Publication, Bombay, 1988.

⁶ Tapti Guha Thakurta, Monuments, Objects, Histories: Institutions of Art in Colonial and Post- Colonial India, Orient Longman, 2004.

⁷ B.P.Sinha, A Comprehensive History of Bihar, Patna, 1974.

⁸ R.R.Diwakar, Bihar Through The Ages, Calcutta, 1959.

⁹ B.K.Jamuar, The Ancient Temples of Bihar, Delhi, 1985.

¹⁰ D.R.Patil, The Antiquarian Remain of Bihar, Patna, 1963.

¹¹ M.M.H. Kuraishi, List of Ancient Monuments of Bihar and Orissa, Calcutta, 1931.

¹² P.C.Roychoudhary, Temples and Legends in Bihar, Bombay, 1998.

¹³ D.Paul, 'Antiquity of the Visnupada at Gaya', East and West, N.S., vol. 35(1-3), 1983.

¹⁴ L.P.Vidyarthi, The Sacred Complex of Hindu Gaya, Concept Publishing Company, Delhi, 1978.

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| | inscription. | | basis of palaeography. | railing of Bodhgaya temple. | Bodhgaya, Book III, p. 67 |
| 6 | Bodhgaya railing inscription. | Gift of Naga devi, the wife of king Brahma- mitra. | 200BCE-100 BCE on the basis of palaeography. | Carved on the fragment of an upright pillar of the sand stone railing of the Bodhgaya temple. | B. M. Barua, Gaya and Bodhgaya, Book III, p. 68 |
| 7 | Bodhgaya railing inscription. | Gift of Bodhirakshita, a man of Tamraparni. | 200BCE.-100 BCE on the basis of palaeography. | Carved on the cross bar of the sand stone railing of the Bodhgaya temple. | Cunningham report, vol.I, p.16 |
| 8 | Bodhgaya inscription. | Records setting of two lion vehicle stone images of bodhisattva by maharaja Trikamala and refers to monastery named amatya Dhruva vihara. | 142 | Inscribed in four lines on the pedestal of the old image of Buddha. | IHQ, vol. IX, p.417-418 |
| 9 | Bodhgaya stone image inscription. | Records the construction of Buddhist temple by a monk Bodhisena, an inhabitant of Dattagallah, for emancipation of his parents and relations, as also his teachers and inhabitants of avagra from the worldly trammels. | 400CE | Inscribed on the black basalt headless image. | IA, vol IX, p. 143 |
| 10 | Gaya copper Plate inscription. | Records the grant of village Revatika in the Gaya visaya to a brahman by Samudragupta. | 400CE | Found at Gaya. | CII, vol. III, p. 254-257 |
| 11 | Barabar hill cave inscription. | Records the installation of the image of Visnu in his incarnation of Krsna by maukhari chieftain Anatarvarman, the son of Sri Sardulavarman and grandson of Yajnavarman. | 500CE.-600CE | Inscribed on the granite rock on the entrance of Lomsa rsi cave of Barabar hill. | IA, vol. XIII, p. 428 |
| 12 | Nagarjuni hill cave inscription. | Records the installation of the image of Siva in the form of Bhupati and his wife Parvati by maukhari chieftain Anatarvarman, the son of Srisardulavarman and grandson of Yajnavarman. | 500CE-600CE | Carved on the right hand side of the entrance of the Ved- athika cave. | CII, vol. III, p. 223-226 |
| 13 | Nagarjuni hill cave inscription. | Records the installation of the image of Parvati, under the name of Katyayani by maukhari chieftain Anantavarman, the son of Sri Sardulavarman and grandson of Yajnavarman. | 500CE-600CE | Carved on the left hand side of the entrance of Gopika cave. | JASB, vol. VI, p. 672 |
| 14 | Bodhgaya stone inscription. | Erection of the mansion of the Buddha at Bodhimandapa by certain Mahanama, a resident of Amardvipa and a member of royal family of Lankadvipa. | 500CE-600CE | Inscribed on the slab stone found near the Mahabodhi temple. | IA, vol. XV, p. 356 |
| 15 | Bodhgaya stone Image inscription. | Records the grant of the statue by Dharamgupta and Dhamastrasena, the natives of Tisyamratirtha. | 600CE | Inscribed on the pedestal of Buddhist image found at Bodhgaya. | CII, vol. III, p.281-282 |
| 16 | Bodhgaya railing | Dedication of a sum of money for lighting the lamp in the great chamber | 700CE | Inscribed on the lower edge of sandstone railing | B.M.Barua, Gaya and |

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| | inscription. | in the honour of the Buddha. | | | Bodhgaya, Book III, p. 69-70 |
| 17 | Bodhgaya railing inscription. | Records the virtuous Sraman Prakhayatakirtti, a descendant of the ruler of lanka, desirous of attaining Budhahood for the peace of mankind. | 700CE | Inscribed on the old stone railing. | J&PASB, 1908, p. 101 |
| 18 | Bodhgaya stone image inscription. | Bull couchant was consecrated by Sri Suphan.d.i Bhat.t.rka, the son of Bhimka-ulla, for the purpose of securing progeny. | 700CE | Inscribed on the back of the bull. | JASB, vol. XXX, p. 193 |
| 19 | Bodhgaya stone inscription. | Records a consecration of a temple dedicated to the four faced lord Siva at a place called Champayatsana by a man Kesava, son of a sculptor Ujjala and also excavation of a tank at the cost of three thousand dramas by him, during the reign of Dharamapala. | 900CE | Found from the place laying south of the Mahabodhi temple | ASIAR, 1908-1909, p.150 |
| 20 | Kurkihar bronze image inscription. | Refers to the reign of Pala ruler, Devapala and records the religious gift of the image to Mallapore, possibly a monastery, by wife of Sidhamaka, a resident of village in Viharavana. | 900CE | Inscribed on the bronze image of standing Balarama. | JBORS, vol. XXVI, p. 251 |
| 21 | Gaya stone inscription. | Refers to the reign of Narayanpala, records the Bhanudeva and his wife Vallabhadevi, dedicated a vas for housing the Yatis and also refers to the house as an asrama of Brahmacharins. | 900CE | Inscribed on a stone slab built into the wall of the Mahadeva shrine in the compound of Visnupada temple. | ASR, vol. III, p. 120 |
| 22 | Ghoswaran stone inscription. | Records the construction and dedication of Viharas and stupas to the diamond throne in the reign of Devapala. | 900CE | Found on the stone slab. | ASR, vol-I, p. 38 |
| 23 | Kurkihar bronze image inscription. | Refers to the reign of Rajyapala and records the gift of the image made by Narsimhan Chaturvedin, a Brahman, who wishes to transfer the merit to the teachers, parents and all the living creatures. | 900CE | Inscribed on the pedestal of a bronze image of Buddha. | JBORS, vol. XXVI, p. 246-247 |
| 24 | Kurkihar bronze image inscription. | Refers to the reign of Rajyapala and records the gift of the image made by Narsimhan Chaturvedin, a Brahman, who wishes to transfer the merit to the teachers, parents and all the living creatures. | 1000CE. | Inscribed on the pedestal of a bronze image of Buddha. | JBORS, vol. XXVI, p. 246-247 |
| 25 | Kurkihar bronze image inscription. | Refers to the reign of Rajyapala and records the gift of the image made by the mulaka, the wife of Mhiaru, a resident of the Apanka monastery. | 1000CE | Inscribed on the pedestal of a bronze image of Uma Mahesvara. | JBORS, vol. XXVI, p. 250 |
| 26 | Kurkihar bronze image inscription | Refers to the reign of king Mahipala and records the religious gift of the image made by one who is mentioned as the son of the goldsmith Kesava.. | 1100CE | Inscribed on the pedestal of a seated Prajnaparamita. | JBORS, vol. XXXVI, p. 245 |
| 27 | Gaya temple | Refers itself to the reign of the king | 1100CE | Inscribed on the temple of | EI, vol. |

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| | inscription. | Nyayapala records the erection of the temple of Gadadhara and some unnamed shrines by Visvarupa, the son of Sudraka and the grandson of Paritosa. | | Narsimha, which is only a few meters behind the Gadadhara temple, this inscription was composed by Vaidya Vajrapani and engraved by Sarvananda. | XXXVI, p. 86-88. |
| 28 | Kurkihar bronze image inscription. | Refers itself to the reign of king Vighrahapala III records the religious gift of the image by Tikua, the son of Mahayana lay worshipper Dulapa. | 1100CE | Inscribed on the bronze image of the standing crowned Buddha. | JBORS, vol. XXVI, p.40 |
| 29 | Gaya Aksayavata temple inscription. | Refers to the reign of Vighrahapala III and records the erection of two temples of Siva. | Latter half of 1100CE | Inscribed on a slab of stone, affixed to the wall of a small shrine under the Aksayavata, the inscription praises upon Sudraka and says about Visvarupa that he destroyed all his enemies. The Prasasti was composed by vaidya Dharampani, who was friend of Visvarupa. | EI, vol. XXXVI, p. 89-92 |
| 30 | Gaya image inscription. | Begins with the invocation of the sun god, records the erection of a temple for housing several deities, including Maunaditya and Visvaditya, who was the son of Paritosa. | 1100CE | Inscribed on the slab of a stone under the image of Gadadhara temple. Writing resembles Aksayavata temple inscription. | EI, vol. XXXVI, p. 88-89 |
| 31 | Kurkihar bronze image inscription. | Refers to the reign of the king Vighrahapala III, and records the pious gift of the image made by one of the Uttamaraka, the son of Mahattama Dulapa. | Later half of 1100CE | Inscribed on the bronze image of the standing crowned Buddha. | JBORS, vol. XXVI, p. 239 |
| 32 | Kurkihar bronze image inscription. | Refers to the reign of the king Vighrahapala III, and records the pious gift of the image made by pekhoka, the wife of Mahattama Dulapa. | Later half of 1100CE | Inscribed on the bronze image of the standing crowned Buddha. | JBORS, vol. XXVI, p. 240 |
| 33 | Gaya temple inscription. | Records the erection of the images dedicated to various deities, including Maunaditya, excavation of a tank called Uttarmanasa and established of a sattrra near Aksayavata by the king Yaksapala, the son of Visvarupa and grandson of Sudraka of the great brahman family. | Mid 1100CE | Found hidden in the door jamb inside Sitala temple, composed by Brahman family hailing from Agnigrama and was written by Padamapani. | IA, vol. XVI, p.63 |
| 34 | Bodhgaya image inscription. | Records the construction of a temple with three images by Sri Punabhadra, the son of the illustrious Samanta and the grandson of Dharma of Chinda family. | 1200CE | | IA, vol. IX, p. 143 |
| 35 | Gaya image inscription | Refers itself to the reign of Govindapala, of the Pala dynasty. It records some transactions which Vidyadhara, the son of Dallana of the Vasistha gotra, in the temple of Gadahrta, was making provision to feed the brahmins at the temple, on the fifth day of the bright fortnight of | 1200CE | Inscribed on the black slab stone image of a four armed female deity which was found embedded in the wall of a shrine close to Gadadhara temple. | ASR, vol. III, p. 12. |

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| | | the month of asvins every year and it was conducted by the people who appear to have been devoted to Visnu. | | | |
| 36 | Ramagaya image inscription. | Refers to the reign of the Gurjra-Pratihara ruler, Mahendrapala and records the image to be a gift from Sahadeva, the son of rsi Saudi. | 900CE | Found on the pedestal of the image of Visnu. The image was found embedded in the wall of a modern temple of Siva. | ASR, vol. III, p. 123 |
| 37 | Bodhgaya stone image inscription. | Refers to the Gadhavala king Jayachandra and records the construction of a cave in Jayapura and mentions monk Srimitra as the diksa guru of kasisa Jaychandra. It is composed by Manoratha, the son of Sida. | 1200CE. | Inscribed on a portion of a railing pillar. | Proceedings ASB, 1880, p. 77 |
| 38 | Bodhgaya stone image inscription. | Refers itself to the king Tunga, the grandson of Nanda, of the Rastrakuta race and records the dedication of a repository for the aromatics and incense for the service of Buddha, by the Rastrakuta king. | 1000CE-1100CE | Inscribed on a slab of black stone attached to the gate of monastery of Bodhgaya. | ASR, vol. III, p. 126 |
| 39 | Bodhgaya stone image inscription. | Records the Buddhist shrine with the image of the Buddha, by Bhatta Damodara with the assent of the king Asokachalla deva, at the request of number of his officials. Provision was also made for the offerings in the three chaityas with the lamps by certain officials to be offered to the god daily by the members of the simhalese order at Mahabodhi and others. | 1200CE | Inscribed on a slab of granite stone. | IA, vol. X, p. 346 |
| 40 | Bodhgaya stone image inscription. | Records the dedication of some votive offerings not specified by Sahapala, an officer of Dasratha, the younger brother of Asokachalla, the king of the khasa country of the Sapadalaksa hills. | 1200CE | Inscribed on a rectangular slab stone. | EI, vol. XII, p. 27-29 |

The inscription shows that during the age of Mauryas, the Barabar cave was dedicated to Ajaivikas¹⁵. Ajaivikas were one of the heterodox, non- Brahmanical sects which existed during 600 BCE. The presence of Ajaivikas was so prominent in the region of Gaya that Asoka and later on Dasratha dedicated the Sudama and Visvajhopri caves and Vapiya cave respectively to the Ajaivikas. It is important to highlight the fact that Ajaivikas were one of the sixty two sects which developed as an anti Brahmanical sect during the 600 BCE. and Ajaivikas were different from Buddhists.

Many of the Bodhgaya railing inscriptions, which are dated to 200 BCE - 100 BCE records the gift made by the members of royal families, especially the females, to the temple of

¹⁵ Refer to the serial no. 1 of the list of inscriptions.

Lord Buddha¹⁶. Many of the inscriptions, dated to 400CE onwards, are found in both Gaya and Bodhgaya. These inscriptions record the offerings made to Buddha and Brahmanical deities of the region. For example, Nagarjuni hill cave inscriptions are dated to 500CE. – 600CE They record the installation of images of Siva and Parvati by the Maukharis.¹⁷ Whereas the Bodhgaya stone inscription records the erection of mansion of the Buddha at the Bodhimandapa.¹⁸ The Bodhgaya stone inscription dated to 900CE records the consecration of a temple dedicated to Siva¹⁹ and in the same region the inscription of Bodhgaya railing records the deposition of money to light the lamps in the chamber of the Buddha²⁰. The Kurkihar bronze image inscription dated to 900CE records the gift given to the monastery by wife of Siddhamaka²¹ and another inscription from Goshwaran dated to the same period records the construction of viharas and stupas to the Buddha.²²

Many of the inscriptions which come from the Gaya temple, dated to 1100CE, records the submission or erection of images of the Brahmanical deities²³. Whereas the Bodhgaya stone inscription of the same date records the dedication to the lord Buddha, chaityas and viharas²⁴. Hence, one can read clearly that the inscriptions of the same date record the dedications to deities of Brahmanism and Buddhism in the region of Gaya. Therefore, the writings which present the linear development of religion in the region of Gaya need to be relooked. We can observe from the list of inscriptions, both Buddhism and Brahmanism flourished and enjoyed the patronage in the region of Gaya at the same time. The secondary writings use the term like the downfall of Buddhism and revival of Brahmanism in the region of Gaya during 900CE – 1100CE. A mere glance through the list of inscriptions makes it vivid that Buddhist monasteries and lord Buddha enjoyed the patronage and dedication, during 900CE – 1100CE. The Brahmanical gods enjoyed the patronage and Bhakti right from 300CE - 1200CE. So, the term revivalism of Brahmanism in this region needs to be questioned.

¹⁶ Refer to the serial no. 4,5,6 and 7 of the list of inscriptions.

¹⁷ Refer to the serial no. 12 and 13 of the list of inscriptions.

¹⁸ Refer to the serial no. 14 of the list of inscriptions.

¹⁹ Refer to the serial no. 19 of the list of inscriptions.

²⁰ Refer to the serial no. 16 of the list of inscriptions.

²¹ Refer to the serial no. 20 of the list of inscriptions.

²² Refer to the serial no. 21 of the list of inscriptions.

²³ Refer to the serial no. 26, 28 and 32 of the list of inscriptions.

²⁴ Refer to the serial no. 37, 38 and 39 of the list of inscriptions.

The list of inscriptions illuminates on the fact that the region of Gaya inhabited the worshippers and followers of different religions, ranging from Ajavika to Buddha to Siva-Parvati to Surya and Visnu. They all flourished almost in the same time period. Perhaps, due to political upheavals during the 700CE-1200CE, the royal patronage might have been affected for a particular religion but decline or revival of any particular religion, in the region of Gaya does not seem to hold the argument. Moreover, if we question the whole idea of inscribing the offerings, it further opens up a new vista of inquiry. Who gets the information recorded? What gets recorded? What amount is worth recording? Is the daily offering by a lay worshipper gets recorded? To answer such questions, one would again like to question the development of religion in a linear fashion and the role of royal patronage in the survival or popularity of a particular religion in a region needs to be questioned. In a nutshell, I would like to conclude that the region of Gaya enjoyed the multi religious presence at any given point of time. The region of Gaya, never owned the identity of Buddhist Gaya or Brahmanical Gaya.

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