

## The Buddhist Movement for Control and Possession of Mahabodhi Temple at Bodhgaya

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**Abstract:** This paper is a study of the Mahabodhi Temple Controversy and the contours of struggle for its possession and ownership among Buddhists and Hindus. It starts with an analysis of various sects present in the Gaya Dharmakshetra before the arrival of Buddha. The arrival of the Mahant, getting firman from the Late Mughals, role of Alexander Cunningham, arrival of Anagarika Dharmapala, beginning of the Buddhist struggle for the control over the temple, role of Edwin Arnold, contribution of various national leaders. Then the period after Independence has been studied. What was the role of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, Surai Sasai, Bhante Anand and other Buddhist leaders in the struggle after Independence? The 1992 Bhikkhu Movement has been analysed. The study also discusses the amendments made in the Bodhgaya Temple Act in 2013, the role of leaders of Bihar like Lalu Prasad Yadav, Kali Charan Yadav, RabriDev etc., and present situation of the temple, role of the Bodhgaya Temple Management Committee and activities of the Mahabodhi Society of India. This paper is based on the study of ancient texts, Hindu and Buddhist literature, archival records of the colonial period, judicial records and interviews of various important figures.

**Keywords:** Mahabodhi Temple, Buddhists, Hindus, Bhikkhu Movement

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## Introduction

It's been 117 years of Bodhgaya's Mahabodhi Mahavihara 'Liberation Movement' from the time when Anagarika Dharmapala first came to India in January 22, 1891. Babasaheb Ambedkar and later Arya Nagarjuna Surai Sasai till 2008 worked continuously for this movement. Originally only Anagarika Dharmapala is the main person who gave birth to this 'Liberation Movement'. In this long period of time Buddhists never used the path of violence and never became trouble makers. Still some writers argue that the activists of the Mahabodhi liberation committee were aggressive people. The history itself is a witness to the fact that Buddhists patiently endured the attacks but themselves never attacked anyone on their own.

## Anagarika Dharmapala: An Introduction

The role played by Anagarika Dharmapala for the right of Buddhists over the temple of Mahabodhi Bodhi vihara is tremendous; he will always be remembered for this work. His service and sacrifice towards the 'Liberation struggle' of the Mahabodhi temple cannot be forgotten. To free this temple from the occupation of Brahmin mahants, he raised a powerful voice by taking the help of liberal non-Buddhists, and Buddhists from all over the world. Anagarika Dharmapala became the first person who raised the voice for the liberation of Mahabodhi temple from the Mahant.<sup>1</sup> In 'Matara' of Srilanka there lived a rich and religious devout family of "Hewavitharana". One member of this family named Hewavitharana Dingiri Appuhami had relation with a reputed priest family. He had two sons who were experts in religion. One among them became Bhikkhu and got famous by the name of 'Hitatiya Atthadassi Thera' and later he became the chief of 'Hittiya Raj Mahavihara'. Second son named 'Don Carolis Hewavitharana' went to Colombo, where he established a business of furniture making. There he got married to a Colombian businessman's daughter named 'Andiris Perera Dharma gunawardhana'. Don Carolis Hewavitharana donated a land in *Maligkanda* for the building the first Bodhi Bhikkhu pre-education school. Later on this school became the incredible Buddhist educational institute, in which Bhikkhus from Burma, Siam, India, Japan and China used to come for education.

Some years later the wife of Don Carolis given birth to a son on 17<sup>th</sup> September, 1865. His wife's name was Perera who is now known from the name of 'Mallika'. They both named their son "David Hewavitharana". At that time Buddhist children were taken to church for registration and were given the Christian name and Sinhali surname. Don Carolis wanted his son to be settled with him in his business and mother Mallika wanted his son to become a renowned Buddhist Bhikkhu, who would turn the Sinhalese people towards Buddhism again by preaching them the teachings of Buddha's Eightfold Path. When their child became five year old they send him to school. School education was completely contrary to David's talent. With school education David also continued his mother's wishes for getting Buddhist knowledge. Sometimes in the school David had ideological debates with his school's Father. In the young age by the permission of his parents, David Hewavitharana left his home and started working for the Theosophical society with the name of Anagarika Dharmapala. The meaning of Anagarika is 'Homeless'. From 1885 A.D. to 1889 A.D. he kept himself busy in theosophical society. By living here he skilled himself in Buddhist Religion. He roamed whole island of Srilanka and also did a journey to Japan at the age of 24. In Japan, there happened a conference of prominent Bhikkhus, which Colonel Alcott also addressed. There Dharmapala also presented his views. And on returning he brought three Japanese with him, who wanted to learn Pali Language and Theravadi tradition. Those days Edwin Arnold described about the pitiable condition of the Mahabodhi mahavihara of Bihar (India) in a very emotional description. Anagarika got sad after reading that article and decided to go there and restore the Mahabodhi temple.<sup>2</sup>

## Anagarika Dharmapala's First Journey to Bodhgaya

On January 22nd, 1891 Anagarika reached Bodhgaya. At that time his age was only 26. This journey of Bodhgaya totally changed Anagarika and a new era of modern history of Buddhism begun. He promised himself to change the drastic situation of Bodhgaya.

He wrote in his diary about the Bodhgaya situation:

"22nd January: after finishing the breakfast I went to the holy place of Bodhgaya with Durga Babu and Dr. Chatterjee. By walking 6 miles from Gaya we reached this holy place. Here you can see the wreck images of Buddha in 1 mile of distance. By entering the temple of Mahant we see statues of

meditating Buddha and discourse preaching Buddha on both sides of the temple entrance. We met a Bhikkhu Kojen there and made a pledge that we will be staying there till the Bhikkhus will not come for reclaiming the place”<sup>3</sup>.

Here Anagarika Dharmapala started writing articles and letters to the other countries of the world. At that time many in the Buddhist world was worried about the future of Mahabodhi temple. There was lack of funds and appropriate resources. He was so shocked to see that images of Buddha were described as Brahmin gods by the village people and these people were not aware of Buddha and his Dhamma. The answers of Anagarika Dharmapala’s letters started coming and his struggle brought enthusiasm in Buddhist Bhikkhus to rethink about the Mahabodhi temple of Bodhgaya. But in the heart of the Hindu Mahant, who controlled the temple, a feeling of hatred started to emerge. Anagarika made a discussion with some low grade officers about the Mahabodhi temple and they claimed that it was government property, so it was not a problem to transfer it from the Mahant to its rightful owners. But he was surprised when the district magistrate of Gaya G.A. Gerson told him that the temple and the land revenue collected from there was the Mahanta’s property and hence the solution was to buy the land from the Mahant with the help of government aid. In this discussion six weeks passed away. Then at last he went to Kolkata to collect funds for buying the Mahabodhi mahavihara. At that time Kolkata was the main spot for political and intellectual activities. There he met Babu Neelkomal Mukherjee who was a Theosophist who later becomes his lifelong friend and a partner in his mission. They went to Indian museum and Bengal royal Asiatic society and met Sharatchandra Das. He also met another Theosophist named Narendra Nath Sen who was the editor of ‘Indian Mirror’. He became his friend, whose articles for many years worked for the rebirth of Buddhism in India. After that Anagarika Dharmapala went to Rangoon from Kolkata. He met many people of Burma but no one helped him in his mission economically. So he then reached to Colombo via Adiyar and there made a decision for making an institution for the purpose of requisition of the Mahabodhi temple. There he hosted a conference in Colombo to establish ‘The Bodhgaya Mahabodhi Society’ on 31<sup>st</sup> May, 1891. In the presidency of Srilanka’s famous teacher and Bhikkhu ‘Hikka Duve Sumangala Nayak Mahathera’, this conference was inaugurated. In this conference Anagarika Dharmapala told how the holy Mahabodhi temple rights should be given to the Buddhist people. He bow down his head towards the branch of Bodhi tree which he had brought with himself. The main head of the council gave his support to the project. Afterwards the society’s election happened, in which 18 office-bearers were selected.

Here is the list of people elected below:

- Venerable Sumangala Mahathera – president
- Colonel Alcott – Director
- Anagarika Dharmapala – Secretary
- Veer Sekera – Secretary
- W. D Abrave – Treasurer
- Pt. Vatuvantudeve – Member
- Twelve other people – Members

Among these members were the representatives Krishnachandra Chaudhary from Chatgaon (now Bangladesh) and other representatives from Raoyujan’s Buddhist society and its association secretary. And also the secretary from the ‘Mahabodhi society’ of Kolkata.<sup>4</sup>

Mahabodhi society was earlier called as Bodhgaya Mahabodhi society, which later started working for the re-construction of the ancient Bodhi temple in 1891. Mahabodhi society of India in 1915 becomes a registered institution and systematically office holders were elected. They also opened office of society at Dharmarajika Chaitya Vihara at 4 A, Bankimchandra Chatterjee Marg, Kolkata-700073. In 1892, Anagarika Dharmapala had also started a journal called 'Mahabodhi'. This journal became world famous. In the next year Dharmapala went to parliament of religions organised in Chicago in 1893. Here he gave a speech on Buddhism and also raised the issue of Mahabodhi temple. But the British government did not support him. When the writer of the book 'Gospels of the Buddha', Paul Carus invited him to America, he went there again. Here he established the American Mahabodhi society. Dharmapala got the support of Henry Alcott, Edwin Arnold, Thomas Edison and Buddhists from Srilanka, Myanmar and Japan. In India he got the support of famous personalities like Rabindra Nath Tagore. He got a statue of Buddha made of gold from Japan but the Mahabodhi Mahant threw it out of the temple. When Bhikkhu Mahathera Sumangala was praying at the Bodhi tree, Mahant and his men attacked and injured him. Dharmapala travelled all over the world to campaign for Mahabodhi temple. In 1927, he got seriously ill and went back to Srilanka. He came back to India 3 years later but decided to become a complete Bhikkhu. Now his name was Sri Devamitra. He passed away on 29 April, 1933.

### **Babasaheb Ambedkar's Role in the Liberation Movement**

After Dharmapala it was Dr. B.R Ambedkar who raised the issue of Mahabodhi temple. In 1935 Ambedkar declared "I was born a Hindu but I shall not die a Hindu". After 21 years Ambedkar finally accepted Buddhism on 14<sup>th</sup> October, 1956. Along with him ten lakhs Dalits also became Buddhists. Sometime later two crore more people became Buddhists. These Buddhists became very excited to liberate Mahabodhi temple.<sup>5</sup> On 27<sup>th</sup> September 1948, the chief minister of Bihar, Sri Prakash Sinha, gave a speech on the Mahabodhi temple in Bihar Vidhan Sabha. He said that the objective of Bodhgaya temple bill was to look how Lord Buddha is worshipped in the temple and how Buddhists and Hindus conduct their separate prayers without any controversy. He said that it is not a land issue and the property which the Mahant holds is not a concern of this bill. When Hindu endowment bill will be passed then the issue of Saivite property will be settled. He argued that as Ayodhya is important for Hindus, Mecca and Madina are important for Muslims, Jerusalem is important for Christians, Bodhgaya is important for Buddhists. He said that we don't want to solve this problem through law but through mutual cooperation. When Mahatma Gandhi came to know about this problem he said that we will solve this problem after independence. Now we have got our independence and now we can solve this problem. Buddhists want to save this temple through land acquisition act but how can we use this law for this temple? the chief minister informed that in 1903 the government of Bengal had appointed a commission to look into the matter under Sharda Chandra Mitra and Hari Prasad Shastri. They proposed a joint committee for the temple but it was not accepted by either the Mahant or the Buddhists. In 1909 Buddhists of Sikkim also approached the government but did not get good response.<sup>6</sup>

### **Japanese Demand**

During the First World War Japan had supported Britain, after the war they asked Britain to give Buddhists some rights on the Bodhgaya temple but the British refused. In 1922 there were movements in Myanmar and Srilanka. In the same year the Buddhists also requested the Congress committee to do something about it. The Congress gave this task Dr. Rajendra Prasad. Rajendra Prasad organised a meeting between Bihar Hindu Sabha and Mahabodhi society. A committee was formed. Its members

were Mr. Pal, Rajendra Prasad, Mr. Jaiswal, Brijkishore and other people. These people wrote a very important report. They said that a committee should be formed which has both Hindus and Buddhists and it should jointly manage the temple. But the Bihar government saw it as a conspiracy against the Mahant and refused to accept Congress's demand.

### **Attitude of the British Government**

Whenever the Congress raised the demand of Mahabodhi temple the British saw it as a conspiracy of Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. Rajendra Prasad. Between 1927 and 1935 whenever there was a discussion regarding Mahabodhi temple in the central legislative assembly, Bihar government always said that it cannot make a law on it as it is very dangerous. Because of this, nothing could be done in relation to it till 1935. In 1937 when Congress came into government, Burma was the part of India that's they we could think of satyagraha. Ceylon was also concerned that's why they could also think of Satyagraha. There was talk of Satyagraha in both the places and it was said that thousands of Buddhists will come to Bodhgaya temple and do satyagraha. Then Bihar government decided to make a bill on the issue. Gandhiji had said that we will pass this bill at a correct time. In 1937 Congress had formed government in Bihar but had to resign two years later. The new government was pro-British hence did not want unity amongst Hindus and Buddhists. Hence nothing could happen. In 1947 there was Asiatic conference in New Delhi. Buddhists came there and met Jawaharlal Nehru. They requested him to do something on the Mahabodhi controversy. Nehru wrote a letter and said we should solve this problem. The chief minister of Bihar said that we are proud of Buddhism and we want unity amongst Hindus and Buddhists. Some Hindus even call Buddha as the tenth Avatar of Vishnu. CM argued that these are two streams of the same river. Hindus call him an avatar and Buddhists call him a prophet. If people think that we want to capture the property of the Mahant they are wrong. If Mahant will misuse his money then we will make another bill about it. Sinha said, "I agree with Mr. Vice Chancellor that this bill should be discussed in every home of Bihar. I think that the people will support this temple of Gautama Buddha."<sup>7</sup>

Chief Minister's second speech given on 6<sup>th</sup> April 1949 on the Mahabodhi temple:

"During the Ranchi session I had presented this bill and had talked about the history of the temple. In Ranchi session we decided that we will send this bill to the people. Whatever the people have said has been compiled into a booklet. This confirms two – three things. First, the view point of Buddhists. Second is the view point of people who consider Buddha as the tenth Avatar of Vishnu. Third viewpoint of people who are Hindus but consider Buddha a great man. Amongst the Buddhist there are two kinds of people. One section wants complete control over the temple and wants nothing to do with the Hindus. But majority of Buddhists want a joint committee in which the number of Buddhists is more than Hindus. There are very few Hindus who claimed that Buddha is the tenth Avatar of Vishnu hence the temple should only be under the control of Hindus. Majority of Hindus have supported the Bill. In this way we can say that most people want a joint committee to manage the temple".

The chief minister said that he's not an expert on Buddhism. But he has studied some Buddhist literature:

"After reading many books I have come to the conclusion that there are many similarities between Buddhism and Christianity. Jesus Christ was born in Jews but they did not accept his religion. Hindus accepted Buddha did not accept his religion. They included some of his teachings their religion and called him the 10<sup>th</sup> avatar of Vishnu. Buddha tried to give a new philosophy, a new lifestyle, and a new culture. He tried to understand the truth by both logic and imagination. What he said is also mentioned

in some Upanishads. He argued that there was a power in this world and it could only be achieved by penance. By doing meditation, giving pain to your body, eating less food and wearing minimum clothes we can achieve this power.”<sup>8</sup>

The chief minister argued that nirvana can be achieved in this life itself. According to him the real nirvana was not after Buddha’s death but during enlightenment which he got under the Mahabodhi tree. Buddha gave his message to the entire world and the name of Bihar also has Buddhist origin. The chief minister said that he becomes very sad when people say that there should not be any change in the Mahabodhi temple. He argued that we are proud of Buddha and to show our respect to him is our duty.

### **Dr. Rajendra Prasad’s Speech on Mahabodhi Temple**

Dr. Rajendra Prasad was the first president of independent India. He also gave a speech on Mahabodhi temple Controversy. He said that it was a proud moment for us that after 60 years we were resolving the issue. In ancient time Buddhists from all over the world came here to pray until the Turkish invasion. But during the Turkish rule the temple got destroyed and very few foreign travellers came here in 3-4 centuries. Around four hundred years ago a sanyasi started living here and established a Math. After some years the Math became very rich and its Mahants started to control the temple. Mughal emperor Mohammad Shah Give two villages to the Mahant and the Mahant gathered lots of other properties also. He used it for religious purposes. Although the temple was controlled by the Math, they never stopped Buddhists from praying there. Rajendra Prasad also argued that Hindus considered Buddha an Avatar of Vishnu and in Jaganath Puri there is an idol of Buddha. It is true that Hindus have not given Mahabodhi temple the same importance like Buddhists but they have not disturbed the latter either. According to Prasad when Anagarika Dharmapala came here he was not happy with the management of the temple therefore he found the Mahabodhi Society. He was helped by Edwin Arnold who requested both the government and the people to support Dharmapala. In 1922 Gaya Congress 100 Bhikkhus from Burma came there under the leadership of Uttama. They demanded Buddhist control over the temple. Congress appointed Dr. Rajendra Prasad to look into the matter. He said that the Buddhists demand was justified but Hindus also did some religious practises inside the temple. Also Hindus worship Buddha as an Avatar of Vishnu. Hence a committee should be formed which has government Officials and Hindus and Buddhists. But the Mahant was not ready for it, although the Hindu Mahasabha accepted it. Prasad says “We were not in power in those days hence could do nothing. But now we have got our independence hence we have passed this law.” In 1949 Mahant Harihar Giri handed over the temple to the management committee.<sup>9</sup> Rajendra Prasad said that Buddhism has got finished in India but now it is an opportunity to come together. The Indian state has adopted Asoka chakra and lion capital as its symbol. He hoped ‘both Hindus and Buddhists will come together and develop Bodhgaya into a great centre of learning like Nalanda.

### **Mahapandit Rahul Sankrityayan’s Views on Mahabodhi Temple**

The famous scholar Mahapandit Rahul Sankrityayan was leaving for Japan from India when he was asked about the Mahabodhi Monastery of Bodh Gaya, by the correspondent of a daily and the details was given to the Mahabodhi Sabha Sarnath, which published a booklet named ‘ Bodhgaya Temple’ in Bodhgaya:

“I have seen it before and when I went to Bodh Gaya last February, my mind was very upset seeing the plight of the temple, the picture became very fickle. If you go inside the temple, there is no place

to keep your foot... Its foul smell makes it difficult to stay within 2 minutes. Mind you, that temple is where the people of the world's cleanest living Japanese race come to visit. In Europe and America too, now the number of Buddhists is increasing everywhere. Apart from ordinary travellers, many Europeans and Americans come to Bodh Gaya every year for many pilgrimages. Tell me, when you go inside the temple and see the foul smell, how would our image get hurt.

You go to Lanka, Burma and see Buddhist temples. Your mind will be happy to see the cleanliness there. Those who can't go to Ceylon and Burma, they should look at any Jain temple in India. Then they will know that why the Buddhists want their temples to be clean and beautiful. Mahant's people cannot save themselves by saying that this happened because of the Tibetan people's oil lamps. Firstly the lamps are not daily lightened, secondly special arrangements for lighting of oil lamps could be made, if proper cleaning can be done after lighting the oil lamps then this could never happen.

There was a pipal tree behind the temple, under which Siddharth attained enlightenment and became Buddha. If you go to this place then you will also see garbage there. Milk and many more kinds of things were offered to the Bodhi tree and no maintenance of cleaning there because of which stickiness, smell, and place was full of bad things which makes impossible to sit and do prayer there. And what is the condition of the idol inside the temple? That beautiful ancient idol was covered with the dirty clothes. On its forehead Hindu Tilak is applied. These two things are enough to create anger in any Buddhist. The interior of the temple is also same.

It may be true that the Mahant doesn't stop the Buddhists from praying inside the temple but the condition in which he has kept it is not good. In a way the Mahant has considered the Buddhist idols in the temple as useless which is really disrespectful for Buddhism."<sup>10</sup>

Bhante Anand Kausalayan also gave his comments on Rahul Sankrityayan's statement:

"The way our Mahabodhi temple is being treated from past 50 years is gross injustice. Hindu public does not understand the sentiment of Buddhists people. Hindus don't have a single temple which is as important to them as Mahabodhi is for Buddhists. The Kashi Vishwanath Temple in Banaras is only one amongst most important temples of Hindus. While Hindus have many Buddhists have only one. ... The Bill which has been presented in the assembly says that Hindus will not be stopped from conducting pind daan or offering prayer. There is no attack on the Mahant's property and he has been kept in the Management committee but still he's not ready to accept our demand. The Mahant is saying that the Hindu religion is in danger. We are not in a huge majority that we go everywhere to campaign for our demands. This bill accepts our minimum demands.

The Bill has kept Mahant's property separate from the temple. Mahant has so many villages in his name which old inscriptions prove that they were really granted to the Mahabodhi temple. Presently also the Mahant gets lots of donations in the name of Mahabodhi temple. Even the money which people offer to the temple is taken away by the Mahant. We cannot accept that all the money of Mahabodhi temple belongs to the Hindu Math. We think that at least half of the money should be spent on the temple. Although the Bill in a way favours the Mahant but still he's protesting against it.

We request the Hindu people to support us. If we had included Chinese and Japanese monks in the committee then Hindus would have protested. Therefore we have kept only Srilankan and Burmese monks in the committee.

This is a golden opportunity for the Hindus. They should not let it go. I request the newspapers to write on this issue. They should protest against the wrong things spread about the temple. I request Hindu leaders to present their views through newspapers".<sup>11</sup>

## Other Important Leaders' Speeches on Bodhgaya

### *Vinoba Bhave*

He visited Bodhgaya in 1952. On 3<sup>rd</sup> of November he gave a speech at Bodhgaya which is as follows-

“Friends I’m very happy to come here. Here I have seen a very special temple, such temple is there nowhere in the world, all temples of the world are after it.”

### *Mahatma Gandhi*

“There is no doubt that this temple belongs to the Buddhists. If I’m able to do anything to give this temple back to the Buddhists and give them justice and help them in anyway I will be proud of it...I want to help you in this matter but right now I cannot do anything. I will only be able to solve your problem when India gets independence.”

### *Rabindranath Tagore*

“I have complete faith that all the true Hindus, who really believe in truth will accept this fact that the place where Lord Buddha got enlightenment should not go to a rival religion which has no knowledge of its methods of worship and no sympathy for it, and it will be gross in injustice. I think that it is the duty of every person who believes in justice and freedom and it is their sacred duty to fight for this historical place and give it back to its rightful owners, a place which has a sacred life in the course of history.”

### *Chitranjan Das*

“I believe that the Bodhgaya temple belongs to the Buddhists. Either Hindus should handover the temple to Buddhists or allow them to do worship as they wish.”<sup>12</sup>

## After Independence

On April 26, 1953, at 5:30 in the evening, transferal ceremonies from the Mahant to the supervisory committee were held. Provisions were made for a committee insisting of four Buddhist and for Hindus with the district magistrate of there as ex-officio chairman. This meant the chairman would inevitably be Hindu, though to all committee members were Indian citizens. Then in November 1959 with the attachment of the Bodhgaya temple advisory body of 20 members, two – thirds of whom must be Buddhists.

The supervisory committee has the following duties:

- Maintance and repair
- Use of temple lands
- Welfare of pilgrims
- Appropriate conducting of worship at the temple and of *pindadana* offerings on the temple lands.
- Prevention of desecration of revered images at the temple or any part thereof.
- Receipt and disposition of offering at the temple.
- Sure safekeeping of financial statements and any other records concerning the temple and of all temple property.



- Safekeeping of all temple funds and arrangements for all temple savings and investments.
- Provisions for appropriate remuneration to salaried temple employees.

Babasaheb Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar had created a lot of awareness about self-respect and human rights among the Dalits of India through his social and political movements. Earlier only Buddhists from Buddhist countries like Sri Lanka, Burma, and Japan etc. and some traditionalists of India were struggling to free Bodh Gaya Mahabodhi Mahavihara from the ownership of Mahant, but after a large number of Dalits became Buddhist, the power of Bodh Gaya's liberation struggle unexpectedly increased.<sup>13</sup> Under the leadership of Dr. Ambedkar, awareness of their honour and pride in past history arose. In the ancient Buddhist relics scattered in India, these ancient ruins spoke and recited the great saga of their bygone era. These new ordained Buddhists saw that their four historical Buddhist sites were neglected and the condition of the most sacred of them, Bodh Gaya Mahabodhi Mahavihara, was very pathetic. The holy land there was encroached upon by the Brahmin Mahant, and it was taken over by him and left in the open to be destroyed. Later, even after the Mahabodhi Temple Act 1949 came into force, the majority of Hindu members remained in the management committee of Mahabodhi Mahavihara because this act was made in such a way that the dominance of Hindus would remain in it. The emancipation movement of the Mahabodhi Monastery was gaining momentum more than ever before, for the liberation of that Mahabodhi Monastery completely from the authority of the Hindus.

### Surai Sasai's Contribution

In the year 1992, Buddhists under the leadership of Surai Sasai organised a very huge protest demonstration against the Mahant outside the temple on the auspicious day of Buddha Purnima. They raised slogans against the temple of Panch Pandav and removed the saffron clothes put on it. Armed policemen surrounded the temple and the district magistrate ordered the Buddhists to leave the temple. The Buddhists decided to return back. While Anagarika Dharmapala's movement focused on getting the support of famous foreign personalities, Surai Sasai focused on getting the support of common Buddhists from Maharashtra, Delhi and Uttar Pradesh. Most of these Buddhists are of Dalit origin. Their leader Surai Sasai is a Japanese monk and has been leading the Mahabodhi movement from past 40 years. His office is in Nagpur, Maharashtra. Surai Sasai's real name was 'Minoru Sasai'. He was born in 1934 in the Okayama, city of Japan. When he was 14 year old, his guru Shujuma Yamamoto made him a Bhikkhu and he was renamed as Tenjit Surai meaning 'Sunlight or mountain peak'. After becoming a Bhikkhu Sasai studied at 'Taisho University' of Tokyo. In 1955 he went to Thailand and learned Vipassana. After eleven years he came to India and met Nichidatsu Fujii who was the founder of a Buddhist organisation called 'Nippon Jan Myo Hoji'. Fujii told Sasai to establish a shanti stupa at Rajgir district of Bihar. However in 1969 there was a conflict between Fujii and Sasai and Sasai decided to return to Japan. When he was in Calcutta waiting for his flight, there was an incident which changed his life forever.<sup>14</sup>

He writes,

"It was a full moon night. I was in Samadhi. And then I witness a divine being. He had a huge head and a long beard. He looked like Nagarjuna. He had a long knife in his hand with which he attacked me and said don't go to Japan, go to Nagpur. It is your Karma-bhumi. Then he removed the knife and went away. I thought what should I do? I had to go to Nagpur. I can return to Japan after that. Then I reached Nagpur. I started playing a dhol and chanting Namō Gayō Ho Ringa Kyū. A lot of people gathered there. I asked them if there was a Buddhist temple nearby. They took me to Mr. V.R. Godbole

who was a friend of Dr. B R Ambedkar. In his house I saw two photos, one was of Buddha and other was of the same man whom I had seen in my dream. The only difference was that the man did not have beard. I asked Mr. Godbole that who was he. He told me it is doctor Ambedkar. Then I realised that I had come to the right place".<sup>15</sup>

In the beginning Sasai was not liked by the people of Nagpur. He was called a foreigner. Sasai noticed that the Buddhist living in Nagpur greeted each other with the slogan 'Jai Bhim'. Sasai also started using the same slogan. In this way the people of Nagpur accepted him. He built many Buddhist temples in the city and slowly became very popular. Some people grew jealous of him and they filed a case that he should not stay in India. The Buddhists of Nagpur protested against him and met the Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. Finally he was granted Indian citizenship.

After getting the citizenship of India his local and regional activities increased. Maharashtra Buddhists accepted him as their religious leader. Surai Sasai did many social and religious works that attracted people. They organised an annual procession on Ambedkar's birthday. By Sasai many schools, hospitals and vihara had been established. But the Bodhgaya's Mahabodhi mahavihara liberation movement embellish him with popularity in Maharashtra, nationally and internationally.

The Buddhist followers of Dr. Ambedkar reached in a big number of population to listen the speeches of Surai Sasai. On the call of Sasai, Buddhists of Maharashtra, UP, and Delhi participated in the campaign to liberate Mahabodhi temple. After Dharmapala's death Sasai became the leader of the campaign and has led it heroically. Sasai learned Hindi and Marathi and give his speeches in the local language. Today he is 85 year old but still very active in the movement. He has given the slogan 'Only the Buddhists will control the Mahabodhi temple'. Under his leadership one month agitation was organised in Patna and Bodhgaya to liberate the temple. In the year 1992 Sasai organised the historic 'Mukti Yatra'. Bhikkhu Sumedha of 'All india Mahabodhi Mahavihara Conservation committee' called it Dhamma Jyoti Yatra and invited Buddhists from all over india to join it. Surai Sasai started the Yatra from Mumbai on 27<sup>th</sup> September, 1992. The Yatris went to Puna, Ahmadnagar, Aurangabad, Amravati, Nagpur, Bhopal, Sanchi, Gwalior, Agra, and Palwal and finally reached to New Delhi. A huge meeting was organised in the boat club of Delhi on 14<sup>th</sup> October 1992. Sasai, Other Bhikkhus and Buddhist leaders addressed the gathering and demanded that Mahabodhi temple should be handed over to the Buddhists. After Delhi they went to Sankisa, Kanpur, Fatehpur, Allahabad, Sarnath, Varanasi, Sasaram, and Patna via Rajgir they reached to Bodhgaya on 22<sup>nd</sup> October, 1992. There was a huge conference was going to be host on 23<sup>rd</sup> October. To make it successful conference of the country Ambedkarite and Buddhist institutions played an important role.

After this 'Mukti Yatra' Mahabodhi Mukti Council organised two movements one in 1993 and other in 1994 on the occasion of Buddha Purnima. On both the occasions around twenty thousand Buddhists participated in the event. Most of them came from Maharashtra but others also came especially from U.P, Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Bihar's Buddhists participated in these movements. By seeing the communal tension in north India two thousand police forces were charged on strict duty. The main entrance gate of the Mahabodhi mahavihara was closed and Annual Buddha Purnima festival was cancelled for the first time in forty years. Local activists of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad also protested against the Buddhist's liberation movement. In 1994, shiv sainiks tried to enter the town in two trucks but the police stopped them. In both these years Bihar C.M Lalu Prasad Yadav promised the Buddhists that he will raise their demand in the Vidhan sabha. Hence the Buddhists did not protest for two years. However when lalu Yadav failed to fulfil his promise Surai Sasai relaunched the movement on 6 December 1994. By now a lots of non-Buddhists also joined the movement. Sasai declared that there will be no demonstration or rally, there will be just a public meeting. The district

magistrate allowed 25,000 Buddhists in the temple and also provided them some basic facilities. In this event more and more women and children participated and there were many non- Maharashtrians. The Buddhists were very angry but still they were peaceful and did not attack Hindus. In this event foreigners Buddhists also participated. Tibetan, Korean, and Japanese Bhikkhus also participated in the event. Two hundred people converted to Buddhism here. On the second day of the programme, Sasai along with two hundred volunteers decided to sit on dharna outside the temple. The chief minister promised him that he will accept his demand but again he broke his promise as he did not wanted to make Hindus against him. Despite this the Buddhists remained non -violent.

In 1995, the movement was launched again and indefinite hunger strike were declared in New Delhi and Bodhgaya. A delegation was send to Thailand to raise funds for the movement. The chief minister was forced to take action this time and in the same year he reconstituted the temple management committee and out of four Buddhists members he nominated three Bhikkhus, Surai Sasai, Bhante Anand of Agra and Bhante Anand Ambedkar of Kanpur. This was the victory for the Buddhists but Surai Sasai was not happy. He demanded that the entire 1949 act should be changed. Still he agreed that now the three members of the committee will agitate for the control of the temple in a better way. The movement continues today also. Surai Sasai and his followers attacked the Hindu members of the committee for misusing the funds of the temple. He also criticised the corrupt Buddhist members. This led to lots of conflicts. Ambedkarite groups launched many more movements for the temple. They organised the protest demonstration at Jantar –Mantar New Delhi which continued for 18 months. Bhikkhus declared that they will perform self-immolation if their demands were not accepted. Media gave them lots of coverage. After this the movement has slowed down a little. Buddhists continued to support the movement in huge numbers but non- Buddhists are scared of supporting the movements because of Hindu right wing groups. By 1998 the movement had become very popular and Surai Sasai became very ill. Lalu Prasad Yadav got afraid and suspended the Hindu secretary of the committee Dwarka Sundrani. He replaced him with Bhikkhu Pragyasheel who was a follower of Surai Sasai. Bhikkhus were giving the right to pray, accept donations and guide the devotees in the temple. These jobs were performed by Theravadi Bhikkhus of the Mahabodhi society. In this way out of four Buddhists members of the committee three were from the liberation committee and the secretary of the management committee was also a Buddhist. Most Buddhists considered it a huge victory and left the movement.<sup>16</sup>

After some years, there was a clash between Ambedkarites and foreigners Bhikkhus. New C.M. of Bihar Rabri Devi took advantage of this clash and in the year 2001 she removed Bhante Anand from the committee. She also replaced the secretary of the committee and made RJD Leader Kali Charan Singh Yadav as the secretary instead of pragyasheel. Now only Sasai remain in the committee. As a result the movement was relaunched. Lots of liberal leaders supported the movement by arguing that the temple belong to the Buddhists only. But the movement has not ended till now and continues even in 2021. While the movement continuous even today but it has not got much support from other Buddhist countries. Instead many liberal Hindus have come out in its support. Some writers criticised the movement by saving that Buddhists should not be aggressive. But they forget the injustice which has been done by Hindu Mahant to followers of Buddhism from so many years.

## Notes

1. D. C. Ahir, *History of Mahabodhi Temple*.
2. Ryojun Sato, *The Mahabodhi Temple at Bodhgaya*.
3. Acharya Jugal Kishore Bodh, *Bodhgaya : Atit Se Vartman Tak*, p. 297

4. K. T. S. Sarao, *The History of Mahabodhi Temple at Bodh Gaya*.
5. Ahir, *Buddha Gaya Through the ages*.
6. Acharya Jugal Kishore Bodh, *Bodhgaya : Atit Se Vartman Tak*
7. ibid
8. ibid
9. K. T. S. Sarao, *The History of Mahabodhi Temple at Bodh Gaya*.
10. Rahul Sanskritayan, *Bauddh Sanskriti*.
11. Dr. Bhadant Anand Kausalyayan Mahathera, *Mahavansh*.
12. Acharya Jugal Kishore Bodh, *Bodhgaya : Atit Se Vartman Tak*
13. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, *The Buddha and his Dhamma*.
14. Karlsson, Hans (August 12, 2015), *Surai Sasai: a Buddhist monk battling the caste dragon*, The Japan Times
15. Doyle, Tara N. (2003) *Liberate the Mahabodhi Temple! Socially Engage Buddhism, Dalit-Style*. In: Steven Heine, Charles Prebish(eds), *Buddhism in the Modern World*. Oxford University Press.
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