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RISING FROM THE CREVASSE OF TIME: RETRACING THE SOJOURN OF BODH GAYA THROUGH HISTORY

Dr. Dhriti Roy

Introduction

At a significant point of time in history, when the colonial power of the British was wielding its influence on the Indian subcontinent, and the religion of the Hindus was being overshadowed by clouds of orthodoxy, to an extent that it was leading to an unreasonably unrestrained psychological, political and social conquest over all other prevalent systems of philosophical thought in the country, there rose an eminent intellectual in the history of world Buddhism, whose pioneering efforts contributed towards the revival of the lost glory of Buddhism in India. With such reverence, is thus recorded the name of Ven. Anagarika Dharmapala, the father of Buddhist Renaissance, not only in India but across the global Buddhist community. One of his most significant path breaking initiatives arguably remains to be the revitalization of the Mahabodhi Mahavihara of Bodh Gaya and it is this very historical Buddhist site which happens to be at the core of the academic investigation here.

Objective of the Study

The present study attempts to bring to light, a reflection through history, of the Buddhist centre of Bodh Gaya, as was portrayed in the travel narratives of two of the most distinguished Chinese pilgrim-monk-scholars, Shi Faxian and Xuanzang of the fifth and seventh century respectively. Their first-hand eye witness accounts happen to be two of the earliest records, which are extant now, on the status

of Buddhism in the ancient city of Bodh Gaya. Their detailed portrayal of the pre-modern city of Bodh Gaya, when critically examined, puts an end to the issue which questions the legitimacy of the claim of Buddhists over Bodh Gaya, a claim which was accompanied by a lifelong struggle and selfless commitment to the cause of the *dharma* by Ven. Anagarika Dharmapala and other eminent Maha Bodhi Society members which finally granted the ancient Buddhist site of Bodh Gaya its latent reverential position in the world of Buddhism.

Brief Appraisal of Shi Faxian's Contribution to Buddhist History

Shi Faxian's name remains embedded in the history of Buddhism for being the first Chinese monk to have made invaluable contributions towards the promotion of India-China Buddhist monastic relations during the pre-modern period in time. The fifth century Chinese pilgrim-monk-scholar has been portrayed as a strict adherent of the Buddhist monastic codes of discipline, who left behind for posterity, a thoughtful account of his travels across thirty different kingdoms located along the oasis states of the present Xinjiang Province of China, Central Asia, India, Sri Lanka and Java. The main objective of his sojourn was to bring back to China authentic Indian Buddhist scriptures on *vinaya*, which, he thought, could put an end to the deficient state of *vinaya* studies and practice in China. Shi Faxian is credited with the unprecedented task of having created a new

Dr. Roy is Assistant Professor and In-charge, Department of Chinese, Sikkim University, Gangtok, Sikkim

genre of travel
titled, *Fo Guo*
narrates in its
tradition, the
famous legends
with each of the
Faxian's travel
to the twelfth y
the Eastern Jin
year 416 CE.

Exploring the
Gaya around I

Shi Faxian's
(*Madhyadesa*) I
Pataliputra, Rāj
Gaya. The foll
the translation
is the excerpt o

The city of
Gaya was no m
barren land. A
for a distance
site where Bod
severe ascetism
had overtime t
having travelled
Faxian came ov
had entered the
had pressed a b
enable the Lord
on to it. Once a
two or more li
two village had
milk porridge.
north, Lord Bu
under a large t
the porridge. Th
till date. The
six chi³ in lengt
height. The cold
Madhyadesa had