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## **Foreign Pilgrims To Bodhgaya: Historical Perspective**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Bodhgaya is the most holy place for the followers of the Buddhist faith all over the world, the other three being Kushinagar, Lumbini and Sarnath. Situated on the bank of river Neranjana the place was then known as Uruvela. There are four famous pilgrimage sites for Buddhists namely: Lumbini, where he was born; Bodhgaya, where he attained Supreme Enlightenment; Deer Park in Sarnath, where he preached the First Sermon; and Kusinara, where he passed into Mahaparinibbana. The pious disciple should visit these places reflecting on the particular event of the Buddha's life connected with each place. By the time of King Asoka, four more places, namely: Savatthi, Sankasia, Rajagraha and Vaishali, that were closely associated with the Buddha and scenes of his principal miracles, were added to the pilgrimage itinerary. Together they make the Eight Great Places of pilgrimage. The aim of this research paper is to discuss about the historical perspective of ancient pilgrimage, It also throws light on the ancient foreign pilgrims who have visited Bodhgaya especially the Chinese pilgrims. The research paper also covers downfall of Buddhism and the devastation of Buddhist shrines in the 13th century followed by six centuries of oblivion, which was the darkest period of Buddhism. Finally, the restoration of Buddhist shrines and the revival of Buddhism in India is described to restore the holy shrines back to their past glory.*

**Keywords :** *Uruvela, enlightenment, pilgrimage, mahaparinibbana*

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## INTRODUCTION

Throughout the centuries pilgrims from China, Srilanka, Sumatra Java and Tibet have visited Bodhgaya for religious faith. The continuous influx of pilgrims to Bodhgaya is the teaching of Buddha which encourages all its disciple to visit at least once the place where pivotal elements of his life occurred that is Lumbini, Bodhgaya, Sarnath and Kusinara. This Countries in the modern era. Lord Buddha mentioned four places which pious disciples should visit. The four places are :

- Lumbini: Here the Buddha was born.
- Bodhgaya: Place of enlightenment.
- Sarnath: At this place Buddha set rolling the unexcelled Wheel of Law.
- Kusinara: Here Buddha passed away.
- The four other sacred sites are the places sanctified by the Buddha and scenes of four principal miracles that he performed , namely:
- Sravasti :where the Buddha performed the twin miracle to silence the heretics, after which he ascended to heaven to preach to his mother
- Sankasia: where the Buddha descended from heaven after preaching to his mother and devas for three months.
- Rajgraha: where the Buddha tamed the drunken elephant Nalagiri.
- Vaishali: where a band of monkeys dug a pond for the Buddha's use and offered him a bowl of honey.

Together they make the eight great places for Buddhist pilgrimage .Of the eight, seven are in India while the eighth,the Buddha's birthplace Lumbini is in Nepal.

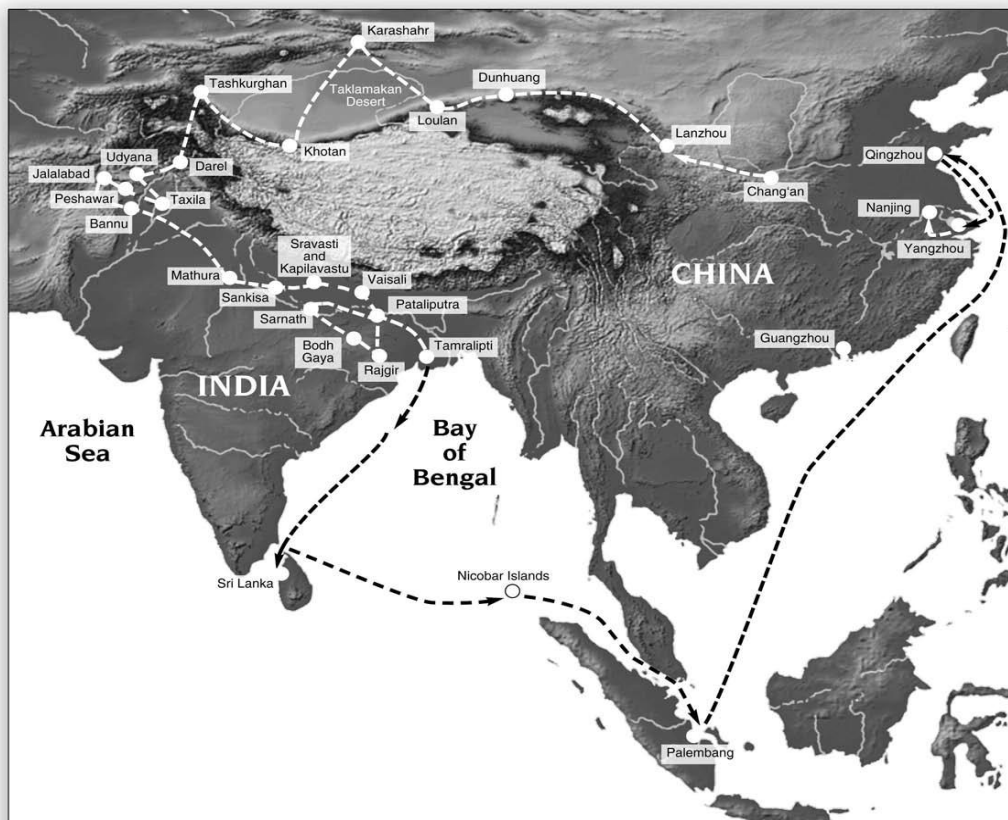
## NOMENCLATURE – BODHGAYA

The name **Bodhgaya** came to use only in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.Earlier in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century it was named as **Uruvela**. According to the 5th century commentator Dharmapala, it was given this name because of the large amount of **sand** (vela) accumulated in this area. Other sources say

that the village was given the name on account of vilva tree growing nearby. Within two centuries of Buddha's enlightenment the name Uruvela fell into disuse and was replaced by other names. The oldest name was **Sambodhi** meaning complete enlightenment. There is no evidence of Buddha ever returning to Uruvela.

## ROUTES TO BODHGAYA

In ancient times there were several approaches to Bodhgaya Pilgrims coming from the west would cross the famous silk route and then to Banaras taking the same route that Buddha took in the first year of enlightenment. Pilgrims from Bengal or Orissa would sail up the Ganges or take the road that linked Magadh to Tamralipti. Slighter longer route was through Nalanda. The other route was through Hastinapur, Sankasya, kanyakubaja to Prayag and followed Yamuna and kausambi.



*Map 1: FaHsien's Itinerary.*

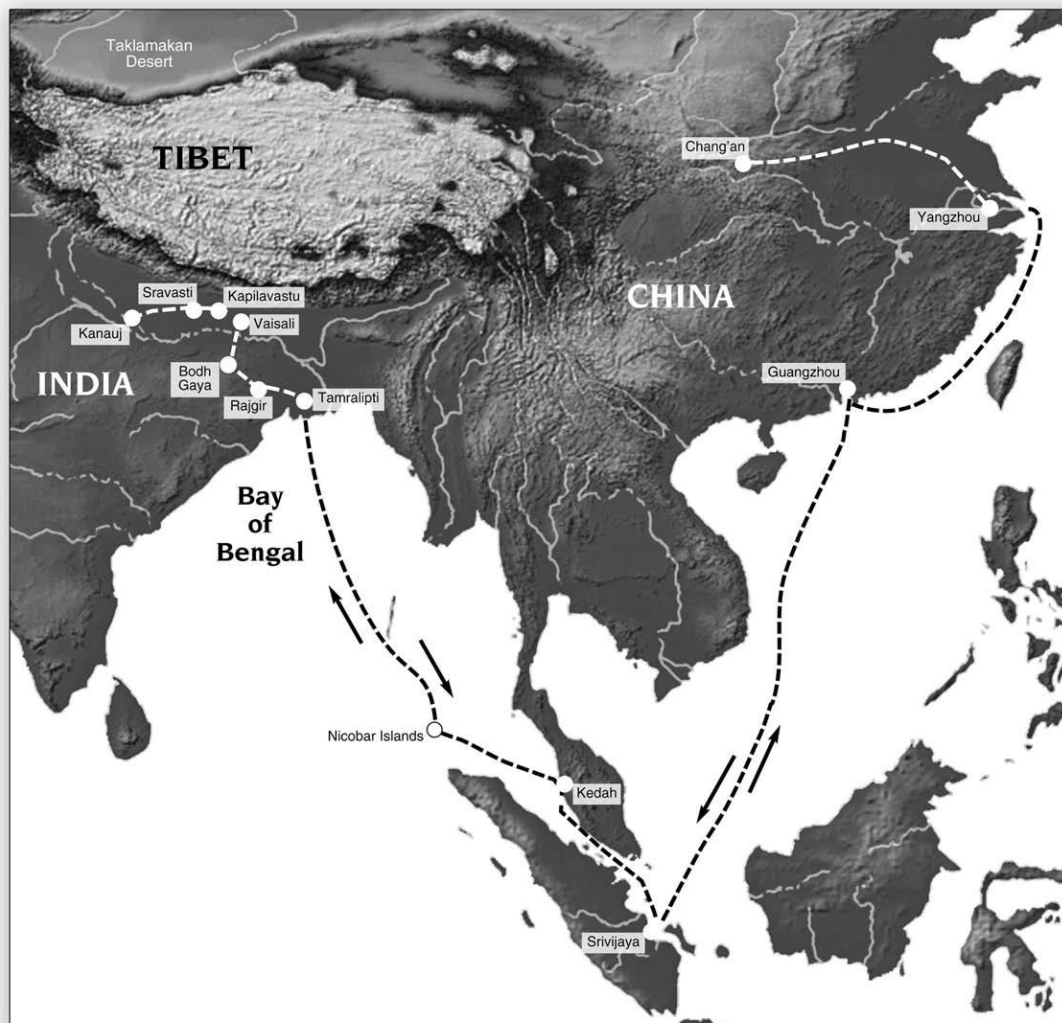
He came through ‘The Silk Route’ and returned via sea route



Map 2. Hsuen Tsang's Itinerary.

He came through ‘The Silk Route’ and returned via land route.





**Map 3.** Yijing's Itinerary sea route through Tamralipti

Sn.No.	CHRONOLOGICAL ORDER	LIST OF FOREIGN TRAVELLERS TO BODHGAYA
1.	100 BC	CULLU TISSA
2.	1 <sup>ST</sup> CENTURY BC	INDO GREEK GOVERNOR THEODORUS
3.	2 <sup>ND</sup> CENTURY BC	CHINESE PILGRIM HOU HONSHU
4.	399-414 AD	FA HSIEN
5.	402 AD	KHUY SUNG AND MINH VIN
6.	520 AD	SUNG YUN

7.	627 AD	HSUEN TSANG
8.	671 AD	YI JING
9.	7 <sup>TH</sup> CENTURY	T SING
10.	11 <sup>TH</sup> CENTURY	TIBETAN MARPA AND ACHARYA
11.	1234 AD	TIBETAN MONK DHARMASVAMIN
12.	15 <sup>TH</sup> CENTURY	MAHAYANIST DHARMADIVAKARA
13.	16 <sup>TH</sup> CENTURY	BUDDHAGUPTA
14.	1833 AD	SIR ALEXANDER CUNNINGHAM
15.	1886 AD	SIR EDWIN ARNOLD

## FOREIGN PILGRIMS TO BODHGAYA

### CulluTissa

The evidence of Buddhist Pilgrimage dates back to **100 BC** when a monk named **CulluTissa** and a group of pilgrims made their way to Bodhgaya .He spent his youth as a novice in one of the Bodhgaya monasteries.

### Theodorus

During the **first century BC** the Indo Greek governor named **Theodorus** visited Bodhgaya and enshrined relics of Buddha during his visit.

### Hou-Honshu

Records of **2<sup>nd</sup> century Bc** shows the visit of the Chinese pilgrim **Hou-Honshu** to Bodhgaya after this period pilgrimage to Bodhgaya came to a halt.

### Fa Hsien

In **399-414 AD** **Fa Hsien** visited the land of Buddha. He was the first Chinese traveler who visited India. He started his trip from the ancient Chinese capital Chang and trekked across

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northern Taxila, then to Mathura, Sravasti, Vaishali, sailed Ganges to Pataliputra and then by road to Bodhgaya, He took a sea route from Tamralipti to go to Srilanka and from there boarded a sea vessel to return to china through South East Asia. The main purpose of his trip to India was the procurement of texts related to monastic rules. There was also the need of crucial Buddhist literature in contemporary China. Fa Hsien's travel records highlighted Buddhist practices at the sites he visited. His memoirs opening passage "A record of a Buddhist kingdoms"<sup>1</sup> includes the description of local Buddhist monasteries, the approximate number of Buddhist monk in the region, teaching and rituals practiced. He describes the conception of the Buddha at Kapilvastu, his birth in a garden in Lumbini, and the attainment of nirvana. He took a sea route from Tamralipti to go to Srilanka and from there boarded a sea vessel to return to china through South East Asia.

His 'A Record of the Buddhist Kingdoms' was the first eyewitness account of the Buddhist practices and pilgrimage sites in Central and South Asia written in Chinese.

### **Khuy Sung and Minh Vin**

In 402 AD, the two Vietnamese monks **Khuy Sung** and **Minh Vin** took a ship to Sri Lanka sailed up the west coast to India and then went from there by foot to the holy land.

### **Hsuen Tsang**

The Chinese pilgrimage again started when in **627 A.D Hsuen Tsang** visited Bodhgaya. He was a pilgrim and a diplomat for Tang China. He started his journey from Chang an in China and travelled over land, along the Silk route toward India through Samarkand, Taxila, Sakala, Lumbini, followed Yamuna, Kausambi, Sarnath and then reached Bodhgaya. The Chinese monk not only promoted Buddhist doctrines and the perception of India as a holy land through his writing, he also tried to foster diplomatic changes between India and china.<sup>2</sup> By the time **Hsuen Tsang** embarked on his trip to India in 627 AD, monastic institutions and Buddhist doctrines had taken deep roots in China.<sup>3</sup> Almost all Buddhist texts had been translated into Chinese. China becoming an important center for Buddhist learning. One of the main reasons of Hsuen Tsang journey was translation of Indian Buddhist texts available

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in China and to procure original works and learn the doctrines directly. He had brought back with him the following articles:

- One hundred and fifteen grains of Buddha relics.
- Six statues of the Buddha.
- One hundred and twenty-four Mahayana works or sutras.
- Other scriptures amounting to six hundred and fifty-seven works, carried by twenty-two horses.

Hsuan Tsang spent the remainder of his life translating the Sanskrit works brought back by him with the aid of a team of translators. He died in 664 AD at the age of sixty-two, after fulfilling his mission of learning from the wise men in India about Buddhism and bringing back the knowledge to China.

### **Sung Yun**

**Sung Yun** reached to the holy land Bodhgaya in **520 AD** and recorded the relics of Buddha. He seems to have travelled to India along the difficult southern branch of the [Silk Routes](#) from Dunhuang to Khotan along the edge of the [Taklamakan](#) Desert, to the north of the [Congling](#) Mountains, and then, like [Fa Hsien](#) had done previously, crossed the mountains.

### **Yijing**

Compared to the travel records of Fa Hien and Xuan Zang the works of **Yijing** have attracted limited attention. **Yijing** embarked on his trip to India in 671 AD and returned in 695 AD. He started from Chang An in china and took a sea route to reach east coast of Tamralipti. From there he went to Rajgir and then to Bodhgaya. He describes 40 practices of monastic rules of Indian monasteries ranging from “cleansing after meals” to the “regulations for ordination” and then compares them to procedures in China.<sup>4</sup> Later in 671 AD Yijing visited Bodhgaya. He wrote about the cultural difference between China and India and returned back via South East Asian port.



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## **T Sing**

**7th Century**-also witnesses inflow of pilgrimage from China. A Chinese pilgrim **T Sing** journeyed to Bodhgaya in the 7th century. He stayed in Sumatra for two months, learned Sanskrit and then taking the route through Tamralipti he reached Bodhgaya.

## **Tibetan Marpa and Acharya Dharmakirti**

In **11<sup>th</sup> Century** Tibetan **Marpa** and **Acharya Dharmakirti** of Sumatra made a pilgrimage to Bodhgaya, Lumbini and Kapilvastu. Born around the turn of the 7th century in [Sumatra](#), Dharmakirti was a prince of [Sailendra](#) dynasty. He became a revered scholar monk in Srivijaya and moved to [India](#) to become a teacher at the famed [Nalanda University](#), as well as a poet.<sup>5</sup> He built and reinterpreted the work of [Dignaga](#), the pioneer of Buddhist Logic, and was very influential among Brahman logicians as well as Buddhists. His theories became normative in Tibet and are studied to this day as a part of the basic monastic curriculum.

## **Dharmasvamin**

In **12th Century AD**-Dharmasvamin Tibetan made his way to Bodhgaya along with 16 other pilgrims in 1234 AD. They travelled through northern Bihar with a party of 300 Nepalese Hindus.

## **Devastation and Downfall of Buddhism in India**

There were two devastations on an extensive scale of Buddhist shrines and monasteries of northern India. The first was by the Ephthalites or White Huns, who invaded India in 500-520 AD and conquered the border provinces of Gandhara and Kashmir. The Hun king, Mihirakula was a barbarian and a sworn enemy of Buddhism, bent on destroying the Buddhist establishment.

During the Pala period of its history from the **9th-11th century AD**, Buddhism became heavily adulterated by the Tantric cult, with its magic spells, yoga and practices that were completely alien to the earlier form of Buddhism.

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The fatal blow was dealt around the turn of the 13th century AD by the Turaskas or Khalijis from Afghanistan. They were fanatical Muslims, bent on conquest and destruction.

In the destruction of the University of Nalanda, it was recorded that thousands of monks were burned alive and yet more thousands beheaded and the burning of the library continued for several months. With the monks gone, no one was left to carry on their work or lead the demoralized laity who were forcibly converted to Islam or absorbed into Hinduism and Jainism. The high-caste Brahmin priests had always opposed Buddhism because of its criticism of the caste system and while it was under the protection of royal patronage, they had remained silent. After the downfall of Buddhism, they could act without restraint, and began to convert Buddhist temples that had escaped destruction into Hindu temples. In parts of India far from the invaders' control, the caste system regained its dominance and under community pressures, the demoralized Buddhist laity were slowly absorbed into Hinduism.

### **Dharmadivakara**

The last Sri Lankan known to have visited Bodhgaya until modern times came in the second half of the **15<sup>th</sup> Century**. This monk named Dharmadivakara went to Bodhgaya and then decided to go on from there to China. While at the sacred mountain he met some Tibetan who invited him to their country where he travelled and taught widely. However, the strain of several long years of travel, the strange food and the cold climate all proved too much for Dharmadivakara and on his way back to Sri Lanka he was disrobed in Nepal and later died in India. But Sri Lankans were not just enthusiastic about going to Bodhgaya on pilgrimage, they also did much to make a vibrant and thriving center of Buddhism. With their effort the great Mahabodhi monastery was built at Bodhgaya. In later century the Maha Bodhi monastery grew into the great monastic university at par with Nalanda and Vikramsila and became the premier center for the study of Terravada Buddhism in India

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### **Buddha Gupta.**

The last Indian Buddhist known to have visited Bodhgaya in **16th Century** was the monk **Buddha Gupta**. He was born in south India and had already visited Afghanistan, Kashmir, Sri Lanka, Java, the Laccadives and even East Africa before visiting Bodhgaya. He seems to have spent some time at the deserted temple meditating and performing pujas before setting off again on his travels. Next he visited Nepal, Tibet, Burma and Northern Thailand after which he disappeared from history.

### **RESTORATION OF BUDDHIST SITES IN INDIA: THE BRITISH ERA**

The coming of the British to India in the **19th Century** saw the excavation of many ancient Buddhist sites. The prime role was by **Sir Alexander Cunningham** (1814-1893), the first director general of Archeology and the pioneer explorer of Buddhist heritage in India. A man of military discipline, he became associated with archeology when he undertook excavation of the Dhamek stupa in Sarnath around 1840. He had an innate concern for ancient remains, and was deeply disturbed by the way the monuments were suffering from vandalism and the ravages of nature. When Cunningham was appointed the Archeological Surveyor of Indian Archeology in 1861 to lead a scheme for the survey of Northern India, he had a well-formulated plan of following the travel records of the famous Chinese pilgrims Fa Hsien and Hsuan Tsang. These records have proven to be of immense help in locating many of the ancient Buddhist sites such as Kusinara, Sankasia, Savatthi, Nalanda, Kosambi and many others that had become obscured with time. He took archaeological investigation of the Bodhgaya temples and recorded the poor condition of the Buddhist pilgrimage sites<sup>7</sup>.

In **1866 AD**-a **British Civil servant** visited Bodhgaya and played a major role in there storation of Buddhist pilgrimage sites. This continued with the visit of **Sir Edwin Arnold**. In 1886 AD- He wrote several articles describing the deplorable condition of the Mahabodhi Temple, the most sacred place for Buddhists. He was the author of the famous book '**Light of Asia**'<sup>8</sup>. Most of the pilgrims travelled on foot or by bullock cart except where it was possible to ply the Ganges and Yamuna. strongholds of Buddhism, could not even

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recognize the Buddhist relics that were discovered there. While in many places, the Buddha statues that were not destroyed came to be worshipped as Hindu deities

## **CONCLUSION**

The travel accounts of the famous Chinese pilgrims Fa Hien, Hsuan Tsang, Xuan Zang etc have proven to be of great help for archaeologists, historians, Buddhologists, and those interested in studying cross-cultural interaction in the pre modern world. pilgrims, The disappearance of the Buddhism lasted for about six centuries which was the worst period of Buddhism in India. But with the combined efforts of archaeologists, historians, sangha, and the laid devotees the pilgrimage sites were restored. Once again, they are living shrines, worthy of worship Thousands of devotees come every year from all over the world to pay homage to the greatest teacher, the Lord Buddha A visit to these repositories of glorious Buddhist heritage will certainly uplift the mind and enable one to develop good qualities. All devout Buddhist should heed the Buddha's exhortation and go on a pilgrimage at least once in their lifetime. Due to unsafety of the route and lack of proper accommodations for the pilgrims, road to Buddha's land was less travelled. But later with the Sri Lankans coming regularly there were few monasteries set up. Now with the advanced communication linkage by road and by air things have changed and Bodhgaya remains the favorite hub of the Buddhists from all over the world.

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