

Bodh Gaya Temple Act (BTA), 1949

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Bodh Gaya Temple Act (BTA), 1949: Legal, Historical, and Religious Dimensions

Context

- The **Mahabodhi Temple in Bodh Gaya, Bihar**, is one of the most sacred Buddhist sites, marking the spot where **Gautama Buddha attained Enlightenment**.
- The **Bodh Gaya Temple Act (BTA), 1949**, was enacted to **regulate the temple's management** and resolve **disputes between Hindus and Buddhists**.
- However, the **structure of the management committee**, particularly the role of the **District Magistrate (DM) as chairperson**, has led to **persistent demands from Buddhist organizations for exclusive control**.

Key Provisions of the BTA, 1949

- Established an **eight-member management committee** to oversee the temple's administration.
 - **Equal representation** was given to **Hindus and Buddhists**, but the **DM of Gaya** was made the **ex-officio chairperson**.
 - Since the **DM was historically from the Hindu community**, it led to the **perception of Hindu dominance** in temple administration.
 - **Buddhist organizations** have **long demanded full control** over the temple, calling it **Bodh Gaya Mahavihara** instead of a shared religious site.
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Historical Background of the Dispute

Ancient Period

- **Emperor Ashoka built the original Mahabodhi Temple** in the **3rd century BCE**.
- The site remained a **major Buddhist center** until the **Pala dynasty (8th-12th centuries CE)**.

Medieval Period (13th Century Onwards)

- The **invasion of Bakhtiyar Khilji** led to the **decline of Buddhism in India**.
- In **1590**, a **Hindu monk established the Bodh Gaya Mutt**, leading to **Hindu custodianship** of the temple.

Colonial Period

- British-era records **recognized Bodh Gaya as a Hindu-controlled site**, further strengthening **Hindu claims over temple administration**.

Post-Independence (1949)

- The **Bihar Assembly passed the BTA**, formally **transferring temple control to a new joint management committee** instead of a **single Hindu authority**.

Government Interventions and Amendments

- **BTA, 1949**: Aimed to **balance the interests of Hindus and Buddhists** in temple administration.
- **2013 Amendment**: Allowed the **ex-officio chairman (DM)** to be from any religion, reducing **Hindu dominance in administration**.
- **Early 1990s - Bodh Gaya Mahavihara Bill**:
 - Proposed by **Bihar CM Lalu Prasad Yadav** to **transfer temple management exclusively to the Buddhist community**.

- Suggested **banning Hindu idol immersions** and **Hindu marriages within the temple premises**.
 - **Never passed** and remains in **cold storage**.
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The Mahabodhi Temple Complex: A Sacred Buddhist Site

- **One of the four holiest sites in Buddhism**, marking **Buddha's Enlightenment**.
 - **Other sacred Buddhist sites:**
 - **Lumbini** (Buddha's birthplace)
 - **Sarnath** (Buddha's first sermon)
 - **Kushinagar** (Buddha's parinirvana)
 - **Location:** Bodh Gaya, Bihar, on the banks of the **Niranjana River**.
 - **UNESCO World Heritage Site:** Declared in **2002**.
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Architectural Features of the Mahabodhi Temple

- **Grand Temple Structure:**
 - A **50-meter-high pyramidal shikhara (tower)** with intricate carvings and **arch motifs**.
 - **Four smaller towers**, each topped with an **umbrella-like dome**, surround the central temple.
- **Sacred Bodhi Tree:**
 - Believed to be a **direct descendant of the original Bodhi Tree**, under which **Buddha attained Enlightenment**.

- **Vajrasana (Diamond Throne):**

- A **stone slab** marking the **exact spot of Buddha's meditation**.

- **Temple Shrine:**

- Houses a **yellow sandstone statue of Buddha**, encased in glass.

- **The 8-hectare complex** includes **ancient shrines and modern Buddhist structures** built by devotees from around the world.

Conclusion

The **Bodh Gaya Temple Act, 1949**, was enacted to **formalize temple administration**, but it has **failed to fully resolve disputes** between **Hindu and Buddhist communities**. With **growing international attention on Buddhist heritage**, the **demand for Buddhist-exclusive control remains strong**. Future policy decisions may need to **revisit the governance structure** to ensure **fair representation and religious harmony**.

