

Introduction

Placing the past, envisioning the future:

Buddhist memory, material traces and the politics of reinvention in modern India

Douglas Ober and David Geary

This Special Issue of CSSAAME ties together a series of modern histories and contemporary ethnographies of Buddhist spaces spread across the Indian subcontinent. Underlining each of the four essays is a concern for the modern fashioning and reimagining of India as a Buddhist “homeland.” In the past century and a half, Buddhist homeland discourses in South Asia have fostered heightened contact between national leaders, Buddhist royalty, entrepreneurs, artists, monastics and pilgrim-travelers in ways that build upon historical and ritual precedents while simultaneously crafting new paradigms within a transnational, postcolonial arena. Taking inspiration from this translocative orientation, the contributors explore pre-colonial histories of Buddhist movement alongside more recent networks of Buddhist restoration in the subcontinent, with particular focus on the role of social memory and material culture in shaping the modern episteme. The essays gathered here further these inquiries by exploring how these connections have changed in the context of modern India and how the textures of these encounters cut across national, ethnic, religious, linguistic and doctrinal lines.

Keywords Homelands and Diasporas; Modern India; Buddhism; Memory; Material Culture; Politics of Reinvention; heritage

This Special Issue of CSSAAME ties together a series of modern histories and contemporary ethnographies of Buddhist spaces spread across the Indian subcontinent. Underlining each of the four essays is a concern for the modern fashioning and reimagining of India as a Buddhist “homeland.” In the past century and a half, Buddhist homeland discourses in South Asia have fostered heightened contact between national leaders, Buddhist royalty, entrepreneurs, artists, monastics and pilgrim-travelers in ways that build upon historical and ritual precedents while simultaneously crafting new paradigms within a transnational, postcolonial arena. These developments have been largely parallel with modern political transformations the world over, where the birth of new nation-states “heralded a new era of sovereignty and property claims over culture, with material pasts being put to work in the forging of newly formed ‘imagined communities’ in regions with deep histories of cultural exchange and flows.”¹ With innovations in communication and transportation technologies alongside the rising economic influence of Asia, contemporary conceptions of a Buddhist homeland have grown in importance as critical loci of cultural interchange, heritage diplomacy and investment among Buddhist communities and national governments throughout Asia. This includes the layering of Buddhist sacred sites and monumental archaeology as UNESCO World Heritage which has not only reinforced the international importance of Buddhism in the subcontinent, but also repositions material objects and the built environment in ways that make them more receptive to the cultural economies of tourism, and both local and global conservation regimes.

The essays gathered here, borne out of a two-day workshop held at the University of British Columbia in 2019, further these inquiries by exploring how these connections have

¹ Winter, “Heritage diplomacy,” 1013. For a compelling series of case studies mediated via the Indian Ocean world, see Schnepel and Sen, *Travelling Pasts*.

changed in the context of modern India and how the textures of these encounters cut across national, ethnic, religious, linguistic and doctrinal lines. In recent decades, there has been a significant shift away from Eurocentric views of Asian history and the paradigmatic divides of Area Studies scholarship to a broader examination of shared histories within Asia and how the borders set by late colonial empires have been reshaped by powerful social actors and religious movements across nation states boundaries. Given the transcultural reach of the Buddha *sasana* beyond the Indo-Gangetic plains, in many ways Buddhism has long underlined the concept of Asia as an interlinked historical and geographic formation.² Recent scholarship has demonstrated that this transmission has not been unidirectional, but rather a multifaceted process involving intertwined networks of trade that coalesced alongside a vibrant movement of people, ideas, and material culture between India and the rest of Asia.³ Taking inspiration from this translocative orientation, the contributors explore pre-colonial histories of Buddhist movement alongside more recent networks of Buddhist restoration in the subcontinent, with particular focus on the role of social memory and material culture in shaping modern narratives of place and belonging.

While a diverse array of Indian politicians, Buddhist leaders and intellectuals—from Jawaharlal Nehru and Narendra Modi to Anagarika Dharmapala and U Nu—have all spoken of India as the land of Buddhist origins and its homeland, there is a need to question the utility and limitations of the category itself.⁴ History makes clear that different geographical areas (a “land”) may be claimed as a homeland by more than one community in situ or by the “diasporas” connected to those lands. Of no less importance are the abilities of some groups to exercise those claims more effectively than others. Modern claims over “ancestral homelands” have had a particularly trenchant relationship with discourses of religion and nation-state, giving rise to some of the worst atrocities and most persistent conflicts in recent history. As the birthplace of four of the world’s major religions, these types of conflicts and divisions over sacred ground have a long history in the Indian subcontinent. While instances of violence date back to the subcontinent’s premodern past, they continue to inform its modern and contemporary public spheres. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries alone, tensions around sacred space and rites of worship have given rise to alternative meanings and uses, ignited communal passions and influenced broader socio-political change, often extending beyond nation-state boundaries, as in the case of Hindu-Muslim violence in Ayodhya, or Sikh national and diasporic movements for Khalistan, to name just two.⁵

Buddhist sites and their material traces have also emerged as centers of conflicting claims and ideologies that fracture and sometimes violently disrupt the fabric of social lives. In India, this paradigm is most apparent (and best documented) at the Mahabodhi Temple in Bodh Gaya where long-standing traditions of diverse worship and interpretation have given risen to local,

² On this point, see the public lecture by Peter Skilling entitled “Did the Buddha invent Asia?” presented at the University of Sydney on 7 April 2009.

³ There is not the space here to provide a comprehensive bibliography of works detailing these processes. Four important and recent models of scholarship include, Huber, *Holy Land Reborn*; Blackburn, *Locations of Buddhism*; Sen, *Buddhism, Diplomacy and Trade*; Geary, *Rebirth of Bodh Gaya*.

⁴ For a discussion of Nehru’s Buddhist statecraft with reference to figures like U Nu, Anagarika Dharmapala and its continued resonance for Hindu nationalist leaders like Narendra Modi, see Ober, “From Buddha Bones to Bo Trees.”

⁵ Van der Veer, “Ayodhya and Somnath”; Jaffrelot, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement in India*; Hansen, *The Saffron Wave*; Ludden, *Making India Hindu*; Rajagopal, *Politics After Television*; Shani, *Sikh Nationalism and Identity*.

national and global reimaginings.⁶ Parallel developments are visible at a myriad of other contemporary Buddhist spaces in the subcontinent, from Ladakh and Sikkim to Nagarjunakonda and Sarnath to more recent Buddhist spaces like Nagpur. What remains largely undertheorized in all of these arenas, however, are questions surrounding the changing textures of these sites, the ritual and public life of their objects, and the nature of socio-spatial relations as places of increasing domestic tourism and transnational encounter.

Spaces, we are frequently reminded, are crucial to the imagining and self-representation of communities across the globe today. Given the contentious lives of sites and landscapes in fostering and fracturing notions of belonging, the contributors in this Special Issue examine the placing of India's Buddhist past in conversation with the aspirations and politics of future-making. Moving beyond the temptation to see colonialism or the postcolonial nation state as the only dominant mover of modern religious transformation, the contributors engage with what the anthropologist Keith Basso called "place worlds," or the way in which the past is brought into being through conversation with the present.⁷ That is, these papers explore how Buddhist sites and regions within India are not only refashioned through the power of homeland discourses and the politics of narration, but are conditioned by the transregional circulation of people, ideas, and objects across different cultural and temporal spaces. Such movements are becoming increasingly the norm and are having many effects, even for those who have not moved. As Kevin Hannam, Mimi Sheller and John Urry argue, its impacts are visible in everything from the remaking of urban and state spaces, the transformation of nature and climatic conditions, to the restructuring of institutions, spread of diseases, nature of social, educational and private life, and very way that human beings conceive of space and place.⁸ But while not all forms of movement are linked to expressions of homelands, the two are inextricably tied.

In foregrounding the homeland concept, it is also evident that its close relationship with the twinned term "diaspora" needs to be unpacked. What is the relationship between homelands and diasporic communities? Do "homelands" always influence "diasporas," or are their relationships sometimes reversed, and why? Much has been said about this connection that is well beyond the scope of this Issue.⁹ However, we believe that these essays make a strong case for thinking about this relationship in the context of modern Indian Buddhism, if only to draw generative connections and linkages between Buddhist mobilities and the broader global trend towards theorizing migration, transnationalism and deep changes to the nation-state.

In their influential essay, "On Homelands and Diasporas," the anthropologists André Levy and Alex Weingrod contend that today's "new" diasporas are substantially different than their historical predecessors.¹⁰ "Depending upon the particular definition and usage," they write, "there are likely to be many more of them...[having] emerged from the world-wide movement of millions of persons, which in turn has been caused by global inequalities, modern information

⁶ Three excellent studies of the Hindu – Buddhist conflict at Bodh Gaya include, Guha-Thakurta, *Monuments, Objects, Histories*, 268 – 303, Trevithick, *Revival of Buddhist Pilgrimage*, and Kinnard, *Places in Motion*. On the tensions at Bodh Gaya vis a vis the lens of secular tourism, world heritage and religious pilgrimage, see Geary, *Rebirth of Bodh Gaya*; and for a critical study of contemporary Dalit Buddhist activism at the site, see Doyle, "Liberate the MahaBodhi Temple."

⁷ Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places*.

⁸ For a valuable overview of the key analytics in mobilities scholarship, see Hannam, Sheller and Urry, "Editorial: Mobilities, Immobilities and Moorings."

⁹ For an insightful discussion, see the Special Issue in *Mobilities* edited by King and Christou and their introduction, "Of Counter-Diaspora and Reverse Transnationalism."

¹⁰ Levy and Weingrod, "On Homelands and Diasporas."

and production technologies, powerful multi-national corporations that frequently shift production across the world, as well as the more familiar ‘old-fashioned’ reasons of famine and war.”¹¹ The significance of these migrations, movements, and flows is difficult to overestimate, giving profound shape to the very arc of contemporary global history in almost all things political, social, economic and cultural. Yet while scholars have tackled these issues through distinctive disciplinary lenses, the continued invocation of “home” and “away,” the “here” and “there,” make evident that the homeland discourse possesses a strong gravitational force. As Levy and Weingrod put it, we now live in a world in which “millions of persons ‘on the move’ no longer reside in a common place (their homeland, perhaps), but instead have moved to far-distant places (diasporas, perhaps), and yet continue to be or feel connected with one another in various significant ways.”¹²

Is there something valuable in exploring the themes of homelands and diasporas within Asian Buddhist contexts and interconnections? And, what are the kinds of social and cultural processes that unfold as a religious “diasporic” community rebuilds their ties to both a physical and imagined “homeland” in the midst of local and nationalized claims to the past? By drawing out these connections this Special Issues also contributes to a growing body of scholarship concerning the anthropology of place, historical memory, the materiality of the past, and their vital roles in religious world-making, social imaginations and political cultures.¹³ At the same time, we exercise caution in not overextending the power of the homelands discourse to diaspora communities at the expenses of those living in “exile in the land of the Buddha.”¹⁴ This is certainly the case for many Tibetan refugees who have a very different and highly politicized understanding of a territorial homeland and arguably, many Dalit and Bahujan Buddhist converts as well, who continue to feel marginalized within a dominant Hindu society. For example, how do minorities such as Tibetan Buddhist refugees and/or Dalit Buddhists living in India relate to changing definitions of being part of a religious minority and how does this give rise to dilemmas that emerge from their proximity to sacred space and marginality with respect to other international Buddhist communities who have the means to travel across borders? While some international Buddhist communities identify and visit the Buddhist homeland as processes of re-sacralization and accruing merit, for others, such as Dalit Buddhists, visiting these sites provide cultural resources and sources of empowerment to combat longstanding systemic discrimination. Thus, “the desire to belong, to be connected by blood to soil is a powerful motivator,” and “this motivation extends beyond traveling ‘back’ to ancestral homelands.”¹⁵ It may, in other words, also involve pathways of empowerment and reclamation within the nation-state frame.

Part of the focus—and challenge—of these contributions is how a Buddhist homeland is imagined in the past and present, how they articulate with the politics of religion and nation, and how certain cultural and religious narratives allow for adherents to maintain what Holly Barcus and Amangul Shugatai call “place elasticity,” or “a continuous, meaningful engagement with a place, even if they reside a long distance from that place.”¹⁶ As an intrinsically moral project,

¹¹ Levy and Weingrod, “On Homelands and Diasporas,” 4.

¹² Levy and Weingrod, “On Homelands and Diasporas,” 4.

¹³ In addition to the many other works referenced throughout this introduction and those of other contributors, our engagement with these questions has been informed by Bowman, “Christian ideology and the image of a holy land”; Gupta and Ferguson, eds., *Culture, Power, Place*; Cruikshank, *Do Glaciers Listen?*; and Murphy, *Materiality of the Past*.

¹⁴ Huber, *Holy Land Reborn*, ch. 11.

¹⁵ Russell, “Remembering Places Never Visited,” 411.

¹⁶ Barcus and Shugatai, “Immobile populations,” 1.

framing India's sacred geography as a "homeland" and "land of origins" imposes moral value on the landscape and lends meaning to a collective Buddhist identity that in principle transcends language, nationality, ethnicity and doctrinal differences. It aspires towards an affect of community and obligation, a moral geography where "certain people, things and practices belong in certain spaces, places and landscapes and not in others."¹⁷

In order to examine the ritual resources and claims to moral ground utilized by those developing the Buddhist homeland construct, the contributors engage with two key conceptual frames. The first is the recovery and reconfiguration of Buddhist *material objects and spaces*. Visible all over the subcontinent, these material remains provide important anchors for Buddhist communities of practice, as well as catalysts for Buddhist revival, "ones that are likely to multiply in number and increase in importance and visibility in the coming decades."¹⁸ Central to their concerns are the ways in which sacred sites, commemorative objects and rituals mediate a Buddhist world as shared foci of veneration and contested political ground, as well as sites of urban middle class leisure.¹⁹ As the art historian Catherine Becker demonstrates in her contribution on the recent construction of the Sri Parvata Arama or Buddhavanam, a massive Buddhist theme park in Telangana, the making of new Buddhist spaces in India is as conditioned by concerns for Buddhist pilgrimage as it is by new forms of capitalist consumption, and the simultaneously nationalist and cosmopolitan tastes of India's middle classes. Built just a stone's throw away from the ancient but now submerged Hindu-Buddhist site of Nagarjunakonda, the Buddhavanam stretches over a large territory that when fully complete will include sculpture gardens, replicas of famous stupas, colossal statuary, a meditation center and the Acharya Nagarjuna University for International Buddhist Learning. Through a close reading of its art and architecture, Becker details how the centerpiece of the park—a full-scale replica of the famed stupa at Amaravati—draws on a rich and wide-ranging body of imagery to position India and Telangana, in particular (the youngest state in the nation), as a timeless Buddhist homeland. "The site forges lineages across time and space," she writes, connecting Mahatma Gandhi, the Dalai Lama, B.R. Ambedkar, the Mogao caves in Dunhuang (China), Alchi in Ladakh and other imagery through a pastiche of visual reproductions. Her article demonstrates the ways that material and visual traces serve as important sensory conduits in framing modern and contemporary South Asia as a field of Buddhist homeland desires.

While the Buddhavanam is arguably less a religious space than it is part of a wider modernist register of non-sectarian sites of amusement built for middle class leisure, religious pilgrimage remains an integral part of these homeland desires. As ritual re-enactments of religious narratives, Buddhist pilgrimage in India and Nepal can be interpreted as a journey to see and experience the traces of the Buddha that empowers the homeland discourse and memory.²⁰ Memories of the Buddhist homeland are frequently expressed in the telling of stories and cultural narratives that speak to historical and miraculous dimensions of the Buddha's and other saintly figures' lives. From memorial books, heritage promotion, and tourism to ritual ceremonies and commemorations, all of these operate in ways that reconstruct the past through acts of remembering. For many pilgrims, whether from Asia or elsewhere, visiting the Buddhist

¹⁷ Creswell, "Moral Geographies," 128.

¹⁸ Singh, "Exile and Return," 194.

¹⁹ On the relationship between art, heritage and middle class leisure and urban 'fun' in the South Asian context, see, Brosius, *India's Middle Classes*; McDaniel, *Architects of Buddhist Leisure*; Jain, "Tales from the Concrete Cave."

²⁰ Cueppers and Deeg (eds.), *Searching for the Dharma*.

homeland provides an important ritual catalyst that supports the broader quest for liberation through the accumulation of merit by making contact with places of sacred power.²¹

And yet, the growing importance of Buddhist pilgrimage in India remains a space of critical tension. As the anthropologist Elizabeth Williams-Oerberg shows in her contribution to the Special Issue, pilgrimage circuits are deeply implicated in tourism development plans, heritage and archaeological regulations, existing patterns of veneration and economic livelihood among local populaces, wider geopolitical concerns and sectarian tensions. Focusing on Ladakh, Williams-Oerberg details how Bollywood films and the recent intensification of state investment in tourist infrastructure have helped brand the once independent Buddhist kingdom as India's 'Little Tibet' and 'last Shangri-la.' Although the revitalization and expansion of Buddhist activity in the region has been going on for sometime, the convergence of global Buddhist leaders and their networks, as well as the desires of local Buddhist advocates are contributing to the transformation of Ladakh into a major Buddhist pilgrimage destination. In recent years, Buddhist leaders from all the major Tibetan sects have begun flocking to Ladakh more regularly, overseeing week-long Buddhist rituals attended by thousands of global devotees. In doing so, they both consciously and unconsciously bring diasporic Tibetan communities in line with certain conceptions of national heritage promoted by the Indian government. But as Williams-Oerberg argues, while these local-global mediations are giving definitive shape to Ladakh as a global homeland for Tibetan Buddhism within an Indian nation-state frame, this process of 'Tibetanization' is simultaneously erasing a regional Ladakhi history and culture that is far more distinctive than the term Tibet implies.

The second theme underpinning these essays is the importance of *reinvention*. Rather than seeing the contemporary Buddhist revival in India as merely derivative of certain Orientalist discourses and practices from the colonial milieu, the contributors draw attention to the complex interests and motivations of a range of Euro-American and Asian actors that have played an influential role in reimagining South Asia as the "homeland" of Buddhism. For historians Douglas Ober and Padma Maitland this reimagining was as much a product of Asian Buddhist globetrotters and Orientalist scholars as it was of rightwing Hindu nationalist leadership. In their essay, Ober and Maitland argue that during the colonial period, Hindu organizations like the All-India Hindu MahaSabha and in particular, its foremost patron, the philanthropist-industrialist, Seth Jugal Kishore Birla (1883 – 1967) worked tirelessly to promote these narratives as part of a wider project to appropriate Buddhism as a branch of Hinduism and foster pan-Asian Hindu-Buddhist connections. Through an approach that considers historical, visual and material cultures, they provide a detailed analysis of several Hindu and Buddhist temples and resthouses built by the Birlas in the 1930 to 1940s. These spaces demonstrate how the Birlas, the MahaSabha and rightwing Hindu communities more widely, were able to re-map the Buddha's legacy within a Hindu nationalist vision where Buddhism would always be physically and metaphorically ancillary to the Sanatan Dharma or Eternal (Hindu) Order. The continued influence of these initiatives, they argue, is evidenced by the now popular but contested refrain in India that 'Buddhism is a branch of Hinduism' and that 'the Buddha was born, lived and died a Hindu.'

This is not to say that all contemporary idioms of Buddhism in India are only reinventions, but rather to draw attention to a particular social milieu where various adaptations and new developments have taken place, especially around the maintenance and restoration of a

²¹ Huber, *Holy Land Reborn*; Singh, "Exile and Return"; Maud, "Buddhist relics and pilgrimage"; Geary and Shinde, "Buddhist pilgrimage and the Ritual Ecology of Sacred Sites."

Buddhist moral geography. Central to these efforts are the growing number of ‘diasporic’ Buddhist monastics residing in India (many on a semi-permanent basis) that maintain multiple interests and allegiances across nation-states and that have become key conduits for cross-border pilgrimage flows through their establishment of monasteries, temples and various ritual events. In their essay, the anthropologists John Marston and David Geary direct their attention to the politics of revival surrounding the famed Nalanda Mahavihara in the state of Bihar and how the memory of this ancient monastic-university complex has given rise to multiple reconstructions in the twentieth and early twenty-first century. In its first iteration, the Nava Nalanda Mahavihara, often called the Nalanda Pali Institute, was created in 1951 near the ruins of the ancient archaeological site. Its founder, Jagdish Kashyap, was a highly regarded Indian Buddhist monk with academic training in Sri Lanka. Its creation reflected and influenced the new internationalization of Buddhism in the mid-century, roughly coinciding with the creation of the World Fellowship of Buddhists and a new Buddhist consciousness associated with several Asian countries achieving independence. Although its academic quality was sometimes questioned, its focus on language and translation made study accessible for monks coming from other countries, especially Southeast Asia. In its second iteration, in the early 2000s, plans for a second Nalanda University has gained considerable momentum alongside a renewed sense of ‘Asianess’ on the world stage bringing significant investment and partnerships with South/East Asian countries and various elites.

As Marston and Geary demonstrate, the increased mobility, connection and exchange between peoples and states within Asia has been a vital force in fostering a moral geography of Buddhism steeped in visions of an Indian homeland. Nalanda is, in other words, a site for new kinds of solidarities and an example of the deeply affective relationships that can be built around spaces and which play such transformative roles within global imaginaries and globalizing processes. It is, as Savage, Bagnall and Longhurst argue, evidence that “belonging is not [just] that of an individual to a fixed community rooted in place, but rather, one in which the place becomes valuable to the individual.”²²

Conclusion

To return to our central question at the outset, is there something valuable in exploring the theme of homelands within Buddhist contexts and interconnections? For us, homeland provides an optic through which to explore the tensions around a Buddhist moral geography under the complex cultural politics of modern nation-states. These processes and practices of place making also bring together “interrelations and linkages between local settings and larger regional or global structures and processes.”²³ As Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson remind us, “issues of collective identity do seem to take on a special character today, when more and more of us live in what Edward Said [in *Zionism from the Standpoint of Its Victims*] has called ‘a generalized condition of homelessness,’ a world where identities are increasingly coming to be, if not wholly deterritorialized, at least differently territorialized.”²⁴

We feel that Buddhism finds resonance within this complex cartography in unique ways that brings the past into conversation with the present and future-making. In this global era the “memory of place” and the material traces of the past provide important symbolic anchors for local and diasporic communities, as well as a powerful motivating force for mobile and displaced

²² Savage, Bagnall and Longhurst, *Globalization and Belonging*, 80.

²³ Gupta and Ferguson, “Culture, Power, Place,” 6.

²⁴ Gupta and Ferguson, “Beyond Culture,” 37.

peoples. Though the relation to a Buddhist homeland and its various constructions differ considerably across mobile subjects, local groups, and those in exile in the land of the Buddha, it is our hope that by placing homeland at the center of our analysis, we reopen some old problems for fresh analysis, and also pose and develop an agenda of new topics within the context of Buddhism. What constitutes a religious diaspora and what are the varied meanings of homeland, as Weingrod and Levy suggest, are neither obvious nor clear in a world moved by the incessant migration of people, ideas and texts. The role of this Special Issue therefore is to place these kinds of questions within a wider framework of analysis, drawing on more in-depth ethnographic studies as well as deeper comparative historical perspectives.

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