



Sacred Convergence and Cultural Transformations: A Historical Study of Gaya, Bihar (4th–12th Century CE)

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the religious history of Gaya, Bihar, from the 4th to the 12th century CE, a period marked by political shifts, artistic achievements, and evolving sacred traditions. During this era, Gaya functioned as a rare dual pilgrimage center: Bodh Gaya, revered across the Buddhist world as the site of the Buddha's enlightenment, and Gaya town, a preeminent Hindu tirtha for *pindadana* rituals dedicated to ancestral salvation. The research investigates the coexistence, interaction, and occasional competition between Buddhist and Brahmanical institutions, analyzing how each tradition sustained its identity while sharing artisans, patronage networks, and economic resources. Drawing upon archaeological evidence, inscriptions, textual sources, and art historical analysis, the study traces the evolution of the Mahabodhi Temple, the Vishnupada Temple, and associated sacred sites, highlighting the interplay of political authority, pilgrimage economies, and cultural exchange. It situates Gaya's religious landscape within the broader context of early medieval Bihar, exploring the impact of Gupta stability, post-Gupta regionalism, and the Pala–Sena zenith on both traditions. The decline of Buddhist institutions in the 12th century, driven by reduced foreign patronage, weakened monastic networks, and political unrest, contrasted with the resilience of Hindu pilgrimage practices, which adapted and endured. By integrating multidisciplinary evidence, the research positions Gaya as a dynamic arena of sacred convergence and cultural transformation over eight centuries, offering insights into the processes through which sacred geographies are continuously shaped and reinterpreted in pre-modern South Asia.



1. Introduction

The historical and cultural landscape of Bihar occupies a pivotal position in the religious history of South Asia. From the early centuries of the Common Era, the region formed the heartland of Magadha, a cradle of spiritual innovation and political power. It witnessed the emergence, institutionalization, and transformation of some of the most influential religious traditions (Buddhism, Jainism, and multiple strands of Hinduism) each leaving an indelible imprint on the physical and cultural geography of the region. At the center of this sacred terrain lies Gaya, a site whose layered history embodies the complex interplay between religious traditions, political authority, and socio-economic networks over many centuries.

The period from the 4th to the 12th century CE spanning the Gupta, post-Gupta, and Pala–Sena eras marks an epoch of remarkable religious and artistic efflorescence, coupled with shifting political fortunes. This timeframe is significant for three reasons. First, the Gupta period (4th–6th century CE) is often regarded as a "classical age" in Indian history, characterized by cultural consolidation, the codification of sacred literature, and the refinement of religious art and architecture. During this era, the Mahabodhi Temple at Bodh Gaya underwent substantial renovation, solidifying its position as a Buddhist pilgrimage centre of transregional significance. Second, the Pala period (8th–12th century CE) witnessed the zenith of Buddhist scholasticism through the patronage of world-renowned monastic universities such as Nalanda, Vikramasila, and Odantapuri, even as Brahmanical Hinduism flourished in the form of temple-based ritual complexes and regional tirthas. Finally, by the close of the 12th century, the political disruptions caused by the Ghurid invasions precipitated the decline of major Buddhist institutions, leading to a realignment of the region's religious profile.

Gaya's dual religious identity during this millennium is one of its most striking features. Bodh Gaya, located a few kilometres from the urban centre, was revered across the Buddhist world as the site of the Buddha's enlightenment beneath the Bodhi tree. It attracted a steady stream of pilgrims, monks, and scholars from South Asia, Central Asia, China, and Southeast Asia, forming a hub in an expansive pilgrimage and knowledge network. The Chinese pilgrims Faxian (early 5th century CE) and Xuanzang (7th century CE) provide invaluable eyewitness



accounts, describing the grandeur of monastic establishments, the rituals performed, and the cosmopolitan nature of the sacred site. At the same time, Gaya town itself occupied a central position in the Hindu sacred geography as the pre-eminent site for piṇḍadāna, the offering of oblations to ancestors, believed to grant mokṣa (liberation) to departed souls. The Vishnupada Temple, the Phalgu River, and associated spots like Pretashila and Ramshila Hills formed an integrated pilgrimage circuit embedded in the agrarian and ritual economy of the region.

The proximity of these two major sacred sites (Bodh Gaya for Buddhists and Gaya for Hindus) presents a rare historical case of religious convergence within a shared physical space.

This spatial and ritual coexistence prompts critical questions about the dynamics of interreligious interaction. Did Buddhist and Brahmanical traditions compete for royal patronage, pilgrims, and resources, or did they develop complementary roles within the broader sacred economy? How did artisans, traders, and local communities navigate these overlapping religious geographies? What material, textual, and artistic evidence exists for mutual influence and cultural borrowing? These questions lie at the heart of this study.

The aims of the present research are therefore threefold:

1. To trace the religious history of Gaya from the 4th to the 12th century CE, integrating archaeological, epigraphic, and textual data.
2. To examine the modes of interaction—ranging from coexistence to contestation—between Buddhist and Brahmanical institutions in the region.
3. To assess the role of pilgrimage economies, land grants, temple and monastic endowments, and artisan networks in sustaining the sacred landscape.

In pursuing these aims, the study adopts an interdisciplinary methodology, drawing on multiple categories of evidence. Epigraphic data from Bodh Gaya, Gaya, and surrounding areas provide insights into patterns of patronage, donor identities, and the socio-political affiliations of religious institutions. Archaeological remains, including structural phases of the Mahabodhi Temple, Vishnupada Temple, and associated shrines, illuminate the evolution of sacred architecture and the artistic idioms of different periods. Textual sources such as the *Gaya-Māhātmya*, Puranas, Buddhist chronicles, and foreign pilgrimage accounts offer perspectives on



the theological and ritual significance of these sites. Art historical analysis of sculpture, iconography, and stylistic features reveals shared motifs and localized adaptations across Buddhist and Hindu visual cultures.

The historiography of Gaya's religious history has often been shaped by compartmentalized studies—Buddhist art historians focusing on Bodh Gaya's monuments, Hindu pilgrimage scholars analyzing the piṇḍadana tradition, and political historians examining Pala statecraft. This study seeks to bridge these silos by treating Gaya's sacred landscape as integrated whole, where religious, political and economic forces interacted continuously over eight centuries.

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of the available evidence. The archaeological record is incomplete, with significant losses due to natural decay, reuse of building materials, and later renovations. Inscriptions are sporadic, with notable gaps in certain centuries, and textual accounts are often shaped by sectarian or theological agendas. Nevertheless, by triangulating these different sources, a robust and multi-layered historical narrative can be constructed.

Ultimately, this investigation positions Gaya not merely as a static repository of sacred memory but as a dynamic arena of sacred convergence and cultural transformation. Over the course of eight centuries, it functioned as a stage upon which multiple religious traditions articulated their identities, negotiated their relationships with political power, and embedded themselves within local and trans regional networks of pilgrimage and patronage. By situating Gaya's history within the broader context of early medieval Bihar, the study illuminates the processes through which sacred geographies are continuously made, remade, and reinterpreted, offering valuable insights into the interplay between religion, culture, and politics in pre-modern South Asia.

2. Historical and Political Context

The history of Gaya from the 4th to the 12th centuries CE was shaped by major political changes in Bihar and eastern India. Over this period, the region moved through three broad



phases: the stability of the Gupta Empire, the fragmented rule of the post-Gupta period, and the resurgence of cultural and religious activity under the Pala and Sena dynasties. Each stage influenced the development of temples, monasteries, pilgrimage routes, and the social and economic systems that supported them.

2.1 The Gupta Period (4th–6th Century CE)

The Gupta rulers governed from their stronghold in Magadha and brought political unity, economic growth, and a flowering of art and culture. They were major supporters of Hindu traditions while also providing assistance to Buddhist centers. This policy created an environment in which both Bodh Gaya and the town of Gaya developed as important religious sites. The Mahabodhi Temple at Bodh Gaya, the place of the Buddha's enlightenment, was restored and decorated in the distinctive style of Gupta art harmonious proportions, finely carved figures, and a calm, spiritual expression in sculpture. Gaya's Vishnupada Temple, associated with the Hindu ritual of pindadana (ancestral offerings), and also benefitted from Gupta endowments. Land grants played an important role in this period. Villages free from taxation were given to temples and monasteries, linking agricultural production to the upkeep of religious institutions. This arrangement allowed both Buddhist and Hindu establishments to commission high-quality artworks and maintain their structures.

2.2 The Post-Gupta Period (6th–8th Century CE)

When Gupta authority declined in the late 6th century, eastern India entered a period of political division. Regional kingdoms and local chiefs held power over smaller territories. These rulers often invested in religious buildings and patronage as a way to strengthen their authority and gain public support.

Gaya continued to grow as a Hindu pilgrimage destination. The composition or wider spread of the Gaya Mahatmya during this period gave new prominence to the religious importance of pindadana. Bodh Gaya remained active in the international Buddhist network, supported in part by contributions from pilgrims traveling from Sri Lanka, Southeast Asia, and



Central Asia. Archaeological remains suggest that the Mahabodhi Temple received repairs and additions during these centuries, funded by local and foreign donors.

2.3 The Pala–Sena Period (8th–12th Century CE)

The rise of the Pala dynasty in the late 8th century marked a new chapter for Buddhism in Bihar. The Palas were renowned patrons of Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism, and Bodh Gaya became a major center for religious activity under their rule. They granted land, funded construction, and commissioned elaborate carvings for the Mahabodhi Temple. Statues of Tara, Avalokiteshvara, and Vajrasattva from this period show both artistic refinement and the influence of wider Buddhist traditions across Asia. Hindu temples in Gaya also received steady support during the Pala era. The Vishnupada Temple and other sacred sites were maintained through grants from court officials, merchants, and landholders. This ensured that Hindu pilgrimage remained vibrant alongside the flourishing of Buddhist institutions. In the late 11th century, the Sena dynasty came to power in parts of Bihar. The Senas were closely connected to Brahmanical Hindu traditions and directed greater attention to Hindu temple building and pilgrimage infrastructure. Over time, Buddhist monasteries lost resources and influence due to changing political priorities, reduced foreign pilgrim visits, and the weakening of monastic networks.

2.4 Patronage and the Sacred Landscape

Throughout these centuries, religious patronage was a key element of political strategy. By funding temples, monasteries, and festivals, rulers strengthened their legitimacy and tied their authority to sacred spaces. Gaya was unique in offering two major pilgrimage centers (Bodh Gaya for Buddhists and the town of Gaya for Hindus) within a single region, giving rulers the opportunity to connect with multiple religious communities. Artisan workshops, merchant networks, and farming communities also contributed to the upkeep and growth of Gaya's sacred sites. Pilgrimage fairs and shared economic spaces encouraged interaction between traditions, creating a religious environment that was inclusive and interlinked. This blend of political support, economic integration, and cultural activity secured Gaya's role as a leading spiritual hub in eastern India for more than eight centuries.



3. Buddhist Heritage of Gaya

Bodh Gaya, located within the Gaya district of Bihar, occupies a central place in the religious and cultural history of Buddhism. It is universally recognized as the site where Siddhartha Gautama attained enlightenment under the Bodhi tree and became the Buddha. Between the 4th and 12th centuries CE, this sacred place developed into one of the most important Buddhist pilgrimage centers in the world, attracting devotees, scholars, and artisans from across Asia. Its growth was shaped by political patronage, international pilgrimage networks, monastic scholarship, and the enduring symbolic power of the Mahabodhi Temple.

3.1 Bodh Gaya as an International Buddhist Pilgrimage Centre

By the Gupta period, Bodh Gaya had already established itself as a focal point in the Buddhist sacred geography. The site was linked to earlier pilgrimage routes that connected important places in the Buddha's life — Lumbini, Bodh Gaya, Sarnath, and Kushinagar. Pilgrims from South Asia and beyond undertook long journeys to pay homage at the site of enlightenment, perform rituals, and make donations. From the 5th century onward, inscriptions and archaeological remains show a steady influx of visitors from Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, China, and Central Asia. Donations recorded in inscriptions often came from royal envoys, monastic communities, and lay devotees, many of whom commissioned votive stupas, statues, and stone railings as acts of merit. These offerings not only enriched the artistic environment of Bodh Gaya but also demonstrated its integration into a global Buddhist network. During the Pala period, Bodh Gaya reached the height of its international prominence. The Palas maintained diplomatic and religious ties with Sri Lanka, Java, Sumatra, and Tibet, and Bodh Gaya became a meeting point for monks and scholars from different Buddhist traditions. Pilgrimage to Bodh Gaya was often combined with study at major monastic universities such as Nalanda, creating a continuous flow of religious exchange.



3.2 The Mahabodhi Temple and its Architecture

The Mahabodhi Temple stands as the architectural and symbolic centerpiece of Bodh Gaya. Its origins date back to earlier Mauryan constructions under Emperor Ashoka in the 3rd century BCE, but the structure visible in the early medieval period reflected successive phases of restoration and enlargement. In the Gupta period, significant renovations gave the temple its distinctive shikhara (tower) form, blending Buddhist symbolism with architectural features common in Hindu temple design of the time. The walls were adorned with niches containing seated Buddha images, and the base was decorated with intricate moldings and medallions depicting scenes from the Buddha's life. This integration of narrative reliefs into the temple structure enhanced its role as both a place of worship and a teaching space for pilgrims.

During the Pala period, the temple complex was further expanded and embellished. Stone railings with elaborate carvings, gateways, and small shrine structures were added. The Vajrasana, or diamond throne, believed to mark the exact spot of the Buddha's enlightenment, was encased in protective stonework and surrounded by devotional structures. The use of finely polished black basalt for statues and ornamental elements became a hallmark of this era, reflecting both local craftsmanship and stylistic influences from Bengal, Nepal, and Southeast Asia.

3.3 Contribution of Nalanda and Vikramashila

The Buddhist heritage of Gaya cannot be understood without reference to the great monastic universities of Bihar, particularly Nalanda and Vikramashila. Founded in the Gupta period and flourishing under the Palas, these institutions were centers of advanced Buddhist learning that attracted students from all over Asia. Nalanda, located not far from Gaya, played a key role in maintaining Bodh Gaya's status as a pilgrimage destination. Monks from Nalanda frequently traveled to Bodh Gaya for ritual observances, and visiting pilgrims often studied at Nalanda before or after their stay. Inscriptions record that abbots and teachers from Nalanda contributed funds for repairs and sponsored religious ceremonies at the Mahabodhi Temple. Vikramashila, established in the late 8th century by Pala ruler Dharmapala, specialized in Vajrayana studies and maintained close links with Bodh Gaya. Monks trained in tantric rituals at



Vikramashila often performed these rites at Bodh Gaya during major festivals. The connection between scholastic centers and pilgrimage sites ensured that Bodh Gaya remained both a place of devotion and an active participant in the intellectual life of the Buddhist world.

3.4 Accounts of Chinese Pilgrims

Chinese pilgrims provide some of the most vivid historical descriptions of Bodh Gaya during this period. Faxian, who visited in the early 5th century, recorded details about the Bodhi tree, the surrounding shrines, and the devotional practices of monks and laypeople. His account confirms that the site was already well maintained and regularly visited by pilgrims from distant lands. Xuanzang, traveling in the 7th century, described Bodh Gaya in even greater detail. He noted the towering Mahabodhi Temple, the sacred Bodhi tree, and the diamond throne. He observed hundreds of monks residing in the area, supported by the donations of local rulers and international pilgrims. His records also mention the presence of smaller stupas and shrines marking other important events in the Buddha's life, creating a rich ceremonial landscape around the main temple. These accounts are invaluable not only for their description of architecture and rituals but also for their evidence of the cosmopolitan character of Bodh Gaya. They confirm that the site functioned as a crossroads where different Buddhist traditions, languages, and artistic styles met and interacted.

3.5 Tantric Buddhist Traditions and Art

By the late Pala period, Vajrayana Buddhism had become an important force in eastern India, and its influence was strongly felt at Bodh Gaya. Tantric rituals were incorporated into major festivals, and images of tantric deities such as Tara, Avalokiteshvara, Vajrasattva, and Hevajra became common in temple iconography. These figures were often shown in elaborate attire and dynamic poses, reflecting the more esoteric visual language of Vajrayana practice. The art of this period displays a high level of technical mastery. Black basalt statues were finely carved with delicate jewelry, flowing garments, and detailed lotus bases. The combination of spiritual symbolism with artistic elegance made these works sought after by pilgrims, many of whom carried smaller copies back to their homelands. This helped spread the Pala style across Asia, influencing Buddhist art in Nepal, Tibet, and Southeast Asia.



4. Hindu Pilgrimage and Ritual Traditions of Gaya

The town of Gaya has been one of the most important Hindu pilgrimage sites in India for many centuries. Its reputation rests primarily on the performance of *pindadana* — the ritual offering of rice balls and water to the souls of departed ancestors. According to Hindu belief, conducting this rite at Gaya ensures the liberation (*moksha*) of the deceased from the cycle of birth and death. Between the 4th and 12th centuries CE, Gaya developed a complex network of temples, ritual sites, sacred narratives, and priestly traditions that supported and expanded its role in the Hindu sacred geography.

4.1 Vishnupada Temple and the Pindadana Tradition

The Vishnupada Temple, located on the banks of the Phalgu River, is the focal point of Hindu pilgrimage in Gaya. The temple is believed to enshrine a footprint of Lord Vishnu, set in a block of basalt and regarded as a tangible link to divine presence. This sacred mark is associated with mythological episodes in which Vishnu subdued the demon Gayasura, blessing the site as a place capable of granting salvation to souls. Pindadana at Gaya is a deeply symbolic act. Offerings are made with rice balls, sesame seeds, and water, accompanied by Vedic mantras. These offerings are believed to nourish the souls of ancestors in the afterlife and help them progress towards liberation. The ritual is often performed for multiple generations of forebears in a single pilgrimage, making it a moment of collective family remembrance. Historical evidence suggests that the Vishnupada Temple has been a site of continuous worship since at least the Gupta period. Land grants and endowments from rulers and wealthy donors ensured the maintenance of temple infrastructure and the regular performance of rituals. Over time, the temple became a central hub for pilgrims from all over India, with specific ceremonial sequences and prescribed offerings codified in pilgrimage manuals.

4.2 Gaya Mahatmya and Puranic Literature

The sacred status of Gaya is celebrated and reinforced through religious texts, especially the *Gaya Mahatmya* — a section of various Puranas dedicated to the glories and spiritual merits of the place. The text outlines the mythological origins of Gaya, details the ritual procedures for



pindadana, and describes the benefits that accrue to those who perform the rites here. According to the narratives in the Gaya Mahatmya, Gayasura, a demon of great piety, was granted the boon that anyone touching his body would attain salvation. To regulate this blessing and maintain cosmic balance, Vishnu subdued Gayasura and transformed his body into the land of Gaya, with his head at Pretashila Hill and his feet at the site of the Vishnupada Temple. The text thus connects the geography of the region with a sacred cosmic body, turning each hill, riverbank, and shrine into part of a divine landscape. Puranic literature amplified Gaya's fame across the subcontinent, ensuring that it was not just a regional center of worship but a pan-Indian pilgrimage destination. The repeated retelling of these narratives in temple recitations, fairs, and family traditions helped sustain the flow of pilgrims across centuries.

4.3 Phalgu River, Pretashila, and Ramshila: Sacred Geography

The sacred geography of Gaya extends beyond the Vishnupada Temple to include a constellation of sites connected by myth and ritual. The Phalgu River, a tributary of the Ganges, is regarded as holy and is central to the performance of pindadana. Pilgrims bathe in its waters to purify themselves before conducting the offerings. The river is also linked to a legend in which the goddess Sita, wife of Lord Rama, performed pindadana here for King Dasharatha, further enhancing the site's sanctity. Pretashila Hill, meaning "Hill of Spirits," is believed to mark the head of Gayasura's cosmic body. Rituals performed here are considered especially effective for troubled ancestral spirits. Ramshila Hill, associated with the epic Ramayana, is said to be the place where Rama and Sita offered pindadana for their ancestors during their exile. Both hills have shrines, stone altars, and steps leading to ceremonial platforms, allowing large numbers of pilgrims to conduct rituals simultaneously during festival seasons. These sites form part of a structured pilgrimage circuit, with each location contributing specific spiritual benefits. The movement of pilgrims between them not only fulfills ritual requirements but also supports a vibrant local economy through lodging, food services, and ritual supplies.

4.4 Role of Brahmin Priests and the Pilgrimage Economy

The performance of pindadana at Gaya is closely guided by hereditary Brahmin priestly families, many of whom trace their service to the temple back over generations. These priests,



known as *pandas*, maintain detailed genealogical records of visiting families, enabling pilgrims to establish continuity with their ancestors and fulfill obligations according to custom.

The *pandas* play a dual role as ritual specialists and custodians of sacred tradition. They conduct the ceremonies, recite the appropriate mantras, and ensure that offerings conform to scriptural prescriptions. Their work is not limited to the temple precincts but extends to all the key ritual spots along the pilgrimage circuit. Over time, the organized priestly system contributed to the growth of a substantial pilgrimage economy. Seasonal influxes of devotees created demand for accommodation, food, transport, and religious goods. Merchants, artisans, and service providers thrived alongside the temples, creating a local economy that was both spiritually and materially sustained by pilgrimage. The exchange between pilgrims and the local community reinforced Gaya's identity as a place where religious merit, cultural tradition, and economic livelihood were deeply interconnected.

5. Interactions between Buddhism and Brahmanism in Gaya

From the 4th to the 12th centuries CE, Gaya represented a rare example of two major religious traditions (Buddhism and Brahmanism) flourishing side by side. Bodh Gaya, sacred to Buddhists as the place of the Buddha's enlightenment, and the town of Gaya, revered by Hindus for the performance of *pindadana* (ancestral offerings), were located only a short distance apart. This geographical closeness created an environment where both traditions developed independently yet interacted continuously in social, economic, and cultural spheres.

5.1 Coexistence and Ritual Separation

The two traditions maintained distinct ritual identities, which helped avoid direct conflict. Bodh Gaya was primarily a Buddhist pilgrimage site, attracting monks, scholars, and devotees from across Asia to worship at the Mahabodhi Temple and meditate beneath the Bodhi tree. Gaya town, in contrast, was devoted to Hindu rituals, especially *pindadana*, performed at the Vishnupada Temple and surrounding sacred hills. Although their core practices differed, both communities benefited from the same political stability and the influx of pilgrims. Rulers often adopted inclusive policies, offering patronage to both Buddhist and Hindu sites to maintain



social harmony and reinforce their legitimacy. This dual support allowed both centers to expand their infrastructure and religious influence over the centuries.

5.2 Shared Resources and Patronage

Buddhist monasteries and Hindu temples in the Gaya region often relied on the same networks of artisans, builders, and merchants. The same stone carvers might produce Buddha images for the Mahabodhi Temple and Vishnu sculptures for the Vishnupada Temple. This overlap in craftsmanship led to stylistic similarities in decorative patterns, even as each tradition preserved its own iconographic rules.

Patronage patterns also reveal connections between the two traditions. Wealthy merchants, landholders, and members of the royal court sometimes donated to both Buddhist and Hindu institutions. Such acts of cross-religious giving were both spiritual offerings and strategic gestures to gain favor with diverse communities. Pilgrimage routes occasionally overlapped as well. While most visitors came for a specific religious purpose, some long-distance pilgrims visited both Bodh Gaya and Gaya town, especially if they were traveling from far regions. This movement of people across sites encouraged cultural exchange and increased mutual awareness between traditions.

5.3 Cultural Exchange in Art and Architecture

The art and architecture of Gaya during this period display evidence of mutual influence. The Mahabodhi Temple, although Buddhist in function, incorporated structural features common in contemporary Hindu temples, such as shikhara-style towers and intricately carved doorways. Similarly, some Hindu temples in the region adopted elements associated with Buddhist architecture, including narrative panels and decorative railing motifs. Floral patterns, geometric designs, and lotus medallions were used in both Buddhist and Hindu monuments, reflecting a shared visual vocabulary among artisans. Statues of Buddhist deities like Tara and Avalokiteshvara from the Pala period exhibit stylistic traits also found in Hindu goddess imagery, while Hindu depictions of Vishnu occasionally adopted compositional techniques reminiscent of Buddhist sculpture.



5.4 Balanced Coexistence

The proximity of Bodh Gaya and Gaya created a situation in which cooperation and competition existed in balance. Economic interdependence through shared artisan labor, pilgrimage trade, and mutual political support fostered stability, while distinct ritual practices preserved each tradition's identity. This interaction enriched the cultural and artistic heritage of the region, leaving behind monuments and artistic works that testify to centuries of coexistence and exchange.

6. Art, Architecture, and Epigraphy

The sacred sites of Gaya and Bodh Gaya between the 4th and 12th centuries CE not only played a central role in religious life but also became important centers of artistic and architectural achievement. Their monuments, sculptures, and inscriptions offer valuable evidence of the cultural ideals, political patronage, and religious interaction of the time. The visual and material culture of Gaya during this period reflects both the stability of long-standing traditions and the adaptation of new artistic influences.

6.1 Gupta Art – Ideals of Serenity and Grace

During the Gupta period (4th–6th century CE), Gaya's art and architecture reached a refined level of aesthetic and spiritual expression. Gupta sculptors were known for their mastery of proportion; smooth modeling of the human form, and subtle facial expressions that conveyed spiritual calm. At Bodh Gaya, the Mahabodhi Temple saw renovations and embellishments in the Gupta style. Buddha images from this period, often seated in the *bhumisparsha mudra* (earth-touching gesture), display serene features, downcast eyes, and gracefully draped robes that suggest both inner peace and divine authority. The stone railings and decorative panels incorporated lotus medallions, floral scrolls, and narrative reliefs illustrating scenes from the Buddha's life, serving both a devotional and didactic purpose. In Gaya town, although fewer examples of Gupta-period Hindu temple architecture survive in complete form, sculptural fragments indicate the same emphasis on calm expression and idealized beauty. Vishnu images



from this era often portray the deity in a balanced, symmetrical stance, with fine detailing on ornaments and garments, reflecting the Gupta vision of divine perfection.

6.2 Pala–Sena Style – Tantric Influence and Black Basalt Masterpieces

The Pala dynasty (8th–12th century CE) introduced a different but equally significant artistic style in Bihar. The Pala period is best known for its use of finely polished black basalt stone, detailed ornamentation, and the influence of Tantric iconography in Buddhist and Hindu imagery. In Bodh Gaya, the Mahabodhi Temple and surrounding shrines were enriched with elaborate carvings, doorways framed by intricate floral and geometric patterns, and numerous images of Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhist deities. Figures of Tara, Avalokiteshvara, Manjushri, and Vajrasattva became common, often shown in complex mudras (ritual hand gestures) and accompanied by symbolic objects. These representations reflect the growing influence of esoteric Buddhist traditions in the region. In Gaya’s Hindu temples, particularly the Vishnupada Temple, Pala–Sena sculptural work can be seen in the depiction of Vishnu, Lakshmi, and other deities. These images share stylistic features with Buddhist art of the same era, such as the use of elaborate backplates (*prabhavali*), rich jewelry, and highly detailed lotus bases. This indicates that many of the same artisan guilds worked for both Buddhist and Hindu patrons, transferring skills and visual motifs across traditions. The Sena dynasty, which succeeded the Palas in parts of Bihar, continued to support temple building and sculpture, though their emphasis shifted more towards Brahmanical themes. Their works maintained the technical skill of the Pala period but often favored narrative panels from Hindu epics and Puranas.

6.3 Epigraphy – Donations, Patronage, and Institutional History

Inscriptions from Bodh Gaya and Gaya offer direct evidence of the patronage that sustained their religious institutions. These inscriptions, carved on stone slabs, temple walls, and pillars, record donations from a wide range of benefactors, including kings, queens, monks, merchants, and pilgrims from distant lands. Gupta-period inscriptions reveal land grants to both Buddhist monasteries and Hindu temples, often specifying the village or agricultural revenue assigned for maintenance and rituals. Some records also detail repairs and expansions to the



Mahabodhi Temple, showing the active involvement of the Gupta court in preserving this key pilgrimage site.

Pala-period inscriptions are particularly valuable for understanding the international connections of Bodh Gaya. Records mention donations from foreign pilgrims from Sri Lanka, Southeast Asia, and Tibet, confirming the site's role in global Buddhist networks. They also show royal endowments for temple maintenance, image installation, and the construction of rest houses for pilgrims. In Gaya town, inscriptions from the Pala–Sena era highlight the role of local elites and Brahmin families in sustaining the Vishnupada Temple and the pindadana tradition. These records sometimes include details about the materials used in construction, the names of artisans, and the specific rituals to be performed with the donated resources. Through these epigraphic sources, we can trace not only the flow of wealth and patronage but also the administrative and ceremonial life of Gaya's religious institutions. They provide a rare and tangible link between the material remains of temples and the human stories behind their creation and upkeep.

7. Decline and Transformation (11th–12th Century CE)

By the late 11th and early 12th centuries CE, the religious landscape of Gaya began to change in significant ways. Political instability, shifting patterns of patronage, and external invasions disrupted the balance between Buddhism and Brahmanism that had existed for centuries. While Buddhist institutions entered a period of decline, Brahmanical traditions in Gaya not only survived but also strengthened their presence, ensuring the continuation of Hindu pilgrimage in the region.

7.1 Decline of Buddhist Monasteries

Buddhist establishments in Bodh Gaya and the surrounding region had flourished for centuries under the patronage of rulers, merchants, and international pilgrims. By the 11th century, however, several factors weakened their position. The reduction in long-distance pilgrimage from Southeast Asia, Sri Lanka, and Tibet led to fewer foreign donations, which had been an important source of income for monasteries. Local and regional rulers, particularly after



the fall of the Pala dynasty, began to prioritize support for Hindu temples over Buddhist sites. Monastic networks, once interconnected through great universities like Nalanda and Vikramashila, started to break down. The decline of these educational centers reduced the flow of monks and scholars to Bodh Gaya, weakening the intellectual and ritual activity that had sustained the site. Without steady patronage and fresh recruits, many smaller monasteries fell into disrepair, and their lands were gradually absorbed into other forms of ownership.

7.2 Political Unrest and Invasions

The late 12th century was marked by significant political upheaval in Bihar. The weakening of the Sena dynasty created opportunities for external forces to move into the region. The most disruptive events came with the Ghurid invasions in the 1190s, which targeted both political centers and religious institutions. Monasteries and temples suffered damage or abandonment, and the monastic population dwindled further as the security of the region collapsed. Bodh Gaya's Mahabodhi Temple, although still revered, could no longer function as the thriving international center it had been in earlier centuries. The combination of political instability and the loss of royal protection made it difficult to maintain large-scale ritual activities or to attract pilgrims in the same numbers as before.

7.3 Continuity of Brahmanical Traditions

While Buddhism in Gaya entered a period of contraction, Brahmanical Hindu traditions adapted and continued. The Vishnupada Temple remained an active center for the performance of pindadana, attracting pilgrims from across India. The rituals associated with the Phalgu River, Pretashila Hill, and Ramshila Hill continued to be observed, supported by local Brahmin priestly families who preserved the traditions and genealogical records of visiting devotees. With the decline of Buddhist patronage, some artisan communities that had previously worked for monasteries began focusing more on Hindu temple commissions. The pilgrimage economy, still strong due to the uninterrupted flow of Hindu devotees, provided an economic base for the town of Gaya to remain active as a religious hub. Brahmanical traditions thus maintained continuity not only in ritual practice but also in their institutional and economic structures. This allowed



Hindu pilgrimage in Gaya to remain resilient during a period when much of the region's Buddhist heritage was fading.

8. Conclusion

The history of Gaya from the 4th to the 12th centuries CE presents a rich narrative of religious coexistence, cultural exchange, and institutional resilience. Over these centuries, the region evolved into a rare dual pilgrimage center: Bodh Gaya for Buddhists, revered as the site of the Buddha's enlightenment, and Gaya town for Hindus, celebrated for the *pindadana* ritual for ancestral salvation. The proximity of these two major sacred sites allowed each tradition to maintain its distinct identity while sharing artisans, patrons, and aspects of the local economy.

During the Gupta period, political stability and inclusive royal patronage enabled architectural refinement and the strengthening of ritual traditions. The Mahabodhi Temple underwent major renovations in the Gupta style, reflecting ideals of serenity and spiritual grace, while the Vishnupada Temple grew in ritual prestige and public recognition. Even in the politically fragmented post-Gupta era, local rulers, merchant patrons, and pilgrimage traditions such as those recorded in the *Gaya Mahatmya* ensured that both Buddhist and Hindu institutions retained vitality.

Under the Pala–Sena rulers, Bodh Gaya achieved international prominence as a center for Buddhist learning and devotion, attracting pilgrims and scholars from across Asia. Elaborate black basalt sculptures and richly decorated shrines reflected both artistic mastery and the growing influence of tantric traditions. At the same time, Hindu pilgrimage to Gaya continued without interruption, supported by strong temple networks and hereditary Brahmin priestly families.

By the late 11th and 12th centuries, Buddhist monasteries began to decline due to reduced foreign patronage, the weakening of monastic universities, and political instability, culminating in the disruptions caused by the Ghurid invasions. Hindu traditions, however, adapted and endured, ensuring the continuity of Gaya's sacred identity.



Gaya's enduring importance lies in its ability to adapt to changing political, cultural, and religious contexts while preserving its sacred role in Indian spiritual life. Its monuments, inscriptions, rituals, and living traditions stand as lasting testimony to its central place in the religious history of the subcontinent.

8.1 Suggestions

- 1. Preservation of Heritage Sites** – Use advanced conservation methods for both Buddhist and Hindu monuments to protect delicate stone carvings, sculptures, and inscriptions from weathering and damage.
- 2. Comprehensive Archaeological Mapping** – Undertake detailed surveys of all sacred sites, ancient ruins, and associated landscapes in Gaya to create a digital heritage archive.
- 3. Documentation of Ritual Traditions** – Record *pindadana* ceremonies, associated hymns, and variations in priestly customs to safeguard intangible cultural heritage.
- 4. Integrated Pilgrimage and Tourism Planning** – Develop eco-friendly facilities, rest houses, and interpretation centers to handle large pilgrim numbers while preserving sanctity.
- 5. Academic Collaboration** – Encourage joint research projects between universities, museums, and heritage institutions focusing on Gaya's religious and cultural history.
- 6. Heritage Education and Awareness** – Conduct training for local communities, guides, and school students to promote responsible pilgrimage and cultural preservation.
- 7. Support for Local Livelihoods** – Encourage traditional crafts, ritual supply markets, and cultural events linked to pilgrimage to provide sustainable economic benefits.
- 8. Restoration of Archives and Manuscripts** – Recover and preserve old manuscripts, temple records, and inscriptions to expand historical knowledge of the region.
- 9. Promotion of Cultural Festivals** – Support religious fairs and festivals as cultural heritage events, ensuring proper documentation and visitor management.
- 10. Enhanced Visitor Interpretation** – Install multilingual signboards, provide guided tours, and develop virtual heritage tools to help visitors understand the sites.



11. Protection of Sacred Geography – Safeguard natural features such as the Phalgu River, Pretashila Hill, and Ramshila Hill from environmental degradation and urban encroachment.

12. Security and Crowd Management – Implement proper safety and crowd-control measures during peak pilgrimage seasons to protect both visitors and heritage structures.

8.2 Scope for Further Research

- 1. Post-12th Century Developments** – Study the evolution of Gaya’s religious life after the decline of Buddhism, particularly under Sultanate and Mughal rule.
- 2. Comparative Pilgrimage Studies** – Compare Gaya with other multi-religious pilgrimage centers in South and Southeast Asia to identify patterns of coexistence and transformation.
- 3. Regional Archaeological Exploration** – Investigate lesser-known shrines, monastic remains, and rural religious sites connected to Gaya’s sacred network.
- 4. Artisan and Guild Histories** – Research the contributions of artisan communities to both Buddhist and Hindu monuments, tracing stylistic influences over time.
- 5. Epigraphic Analysis** – Compile and study inscriptions from the Gaya region to understand shifts in patronage, economic structures, and political-religious relationships.
- 6. Transformation of Ritual Practices** – Examine how Hindu pilgrimage rituals in Gaya have evolved over centuries and adapted to contemporary contexts.
- 7. Interdisciplinary Approaches** – Integrate archaeology, art history, anthropology, and religious studies to develop a holistic understanding of Gaya’s sacred heritage.

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