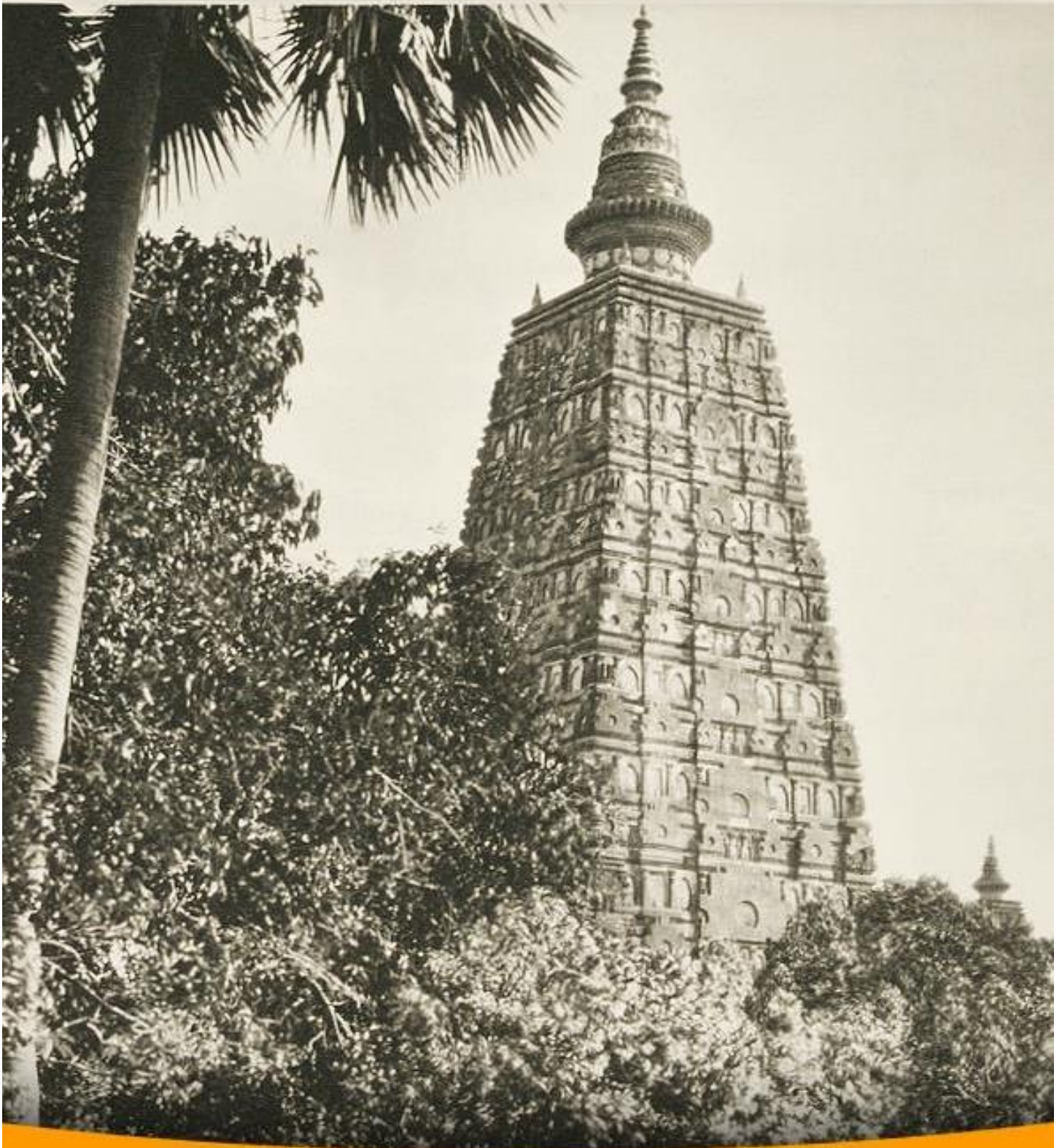


# **The Man Who Saved the Mahabodhi Temple**



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Essays on Buddhist History & Culture

# The Man Who Saved the Mahabodhi Temple



For a Buddhist probably the highlight of a pilgrimage to India is to arrive in Bodh Gaya and then stand at the top of the board stairway leading down to the Mahabodhi Temple and see for the first time that magnificent monument built over the very place where the Buddha attained enlightenment. By any standard it is an impressive sight. The renowned English author E. M. Forster said of it, "There can't be anything like it in the world." This is the first joy for the pilgrim to Bodh Gaya but others are to follow; seeing the noble Buddha image in the temple's inner sanctum, paying respects to the Bodhi Tree, and perhaps sitting in the peaceful gardens around the temple. What the average visitor, Buddhist or not, is unlikely to appreciate is who made these and other experiences at Bodh Gaya possible. Pilgrim from Sri Lanka are probably aware of the struggles of Anagarika Dharmapala to acquire Buddhist administration of the temple. The better informed visitor may have read that Sir Alexander Cunningham was responsible for repairing it. But while the first of these claims is true the second is not. A hundred guidebooks, magazine articles and even encyclopaedia entries credit Cunningham with saving the Mahabodhi Temple from complete ruin by repairing it, but this is not the case.

History tells us that after the Muslim invasion of Bihar in the early 13th century Bodh Gaya was attacked and looted several times and although the temple remained intact it gradually deteriorated despite there still being monks there. It might have been in a state of decay even several centuries before this. The last record of an attempt to renovate the temple was done by an obscure Indian king named Cingalaraja in about the late 13th century.



The Mahabodhi Temple at the beginning of Beglar's renovations

The last Buddhist monk at Bodh Gaya, Sariputra, left for Nepal and China in 1402 and after this we hear no more of Bodh Gaya or its temple until the beginning of the 19th century. Gradually its plaster coating

crumbled in the summer heat and monsoon downpours, the roots of plants and even small trees growing on it cracked the bricks and pried them apart, and the pinnacle broke off, probably as a result of being hit by a bolt of lightning. Finally, the whole front of the temple collapsed. By the time the British surveyor Francis Buchanan-Hamilton saw it in 1811 it was a hopeless ruin and the area around it a jumble of broken masonry and piles of rubbish. A village had grown up around the temple and the locals used the surrounding area as a toilet and a place to graze pigs. Even when the Hindu ascetic known as the Mahant transformed the temple into a Hindu one he made no attempt to repair it.

In 1853 King Mindon Min came to the throne in Burma. While all Burmese monarch saw themselves as Buddhists the Dhamma did little or nothing to restrain their ruthless and often bloodthirsty internal governance and predatory foreign policies, Mindon Min was an exception to this. He was a deeply religious man well-versed in Dhamma and it showed itself in his personal behaviour and his mild reign. Coming to know of the state of the Mahabodhi temple in 1875 he sent a delegation to Calcutta requesting the British Indian government's permission to repair the temple and accommodate some monks there to look after it. Permission was given and soon a team of monks, architects and masons arrived and immediately set to work. It is a sad irony that while this project was done out of genuine devotion it was in fact one of

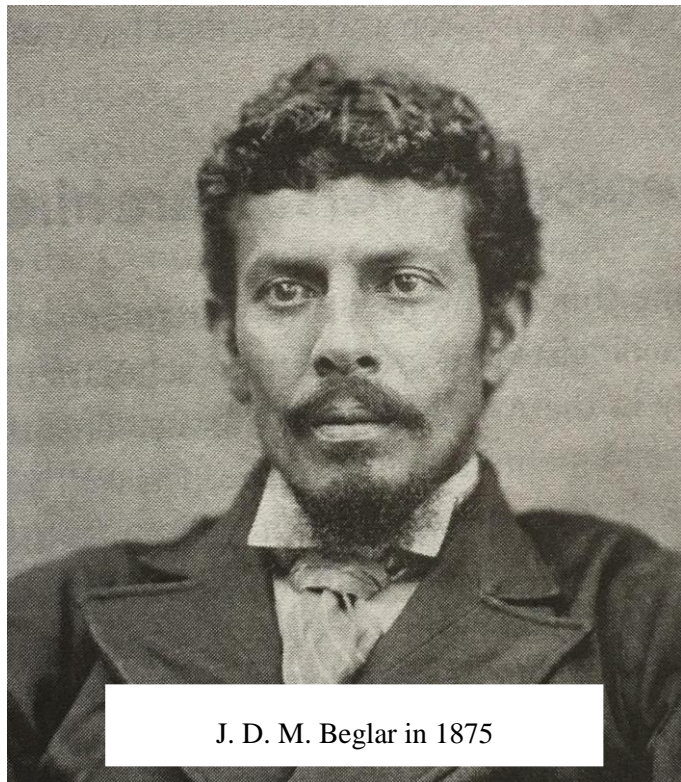


the most destructive thing to happen at Bodh Gaya since the 13th century.

The modern pilgrim will notice the foundations of dozens of small temples and shrines around the main Mahabodhi Temple, except for two, all without the spires that they once had or their stone door frames; the Burmese demolished them all so they could use their bricks to build a wall around the temple. When the great Indian archaeologist Rajendralal Mitra visited Bodh Gaya during this time he was horrified by what he saw. “[The Burmese] are perfectly innocent of archaeology and history and the mischief they have done by their misdirected zeal has been serious. The demolition and excavations already completed by them has swept away most of the old landmarks and nothing of ancient times can now be traced on the area they have worked upon.” In 1878 relations between the Burmese and the British governments deteriorated and the Burmese had to leave thereby saving Bodh Gaya from even more damage. This situation as reported by Mitra prompted the government to finally decide to undertake a complete renovation of the temple and Rupees 20,000 was allotted for the job. On Cunningham’s recommendation Joseph Beglar was selected to carry out what was expected to be a major archaeological and engineering project.

Joseph David Freedone Melik Beglar was of Armenian heritage born in Dacca in 1845 and later settled in Chinsura in Hooghly not far from Calcutta. He secured a job in Bengal’s Public Works Dept. before joining the newly formed Archaeological Survey in early 1871. During

this time Cunningham was faced with numerous difficulties getting the survey re-established after it had been abolished some years earlier, and he was searching for possible assistants. Eventually he found two enthusiastic officers, Beglar and



J. D. M. Beglar in 1875

A.C.L. Carlleye, of who the first “is already favourably known for his zeal and success as a photographer and his remarks on the Buddhist ruins and sculptures at [Vesali] show that he was a taste for archaeology which gives good promise for the future.” Carlleye was to go on to discover Kusinara but eventually had to be dismissed because of his drinking problem. From 1871 onwards Beglar explored and documented ancient sites and buildings in Delhi, Bundelkhand, Malwa and the provinces of Bengal which then included Patna, Gaya, Mongir, Bhagalpur, etc., 103 sites altogether. His detailed and insightful reports were published in volume VIII of the Archaeological Survey Report.

Beglar had a particularly interest in the photography, a medium which had not been widely used in archaeology before, for the most part written descriptions or drawings of monuments and objects were

thought to be sufficient. The hundreds of photographs Beglar took remain today a priceless record of how monuments looked when they were discovered, of inappropriate repairs that were subsequently made to them and of the many that have since disappeared. Beglar retired in 1880 and little is known of his life subsequently. He died in 1907. His contribution to uncovering, documenting and preserving India's past was enormous although it has been largely overshadowed by his more famous colleague and superior Alexander Cunningham. It is not known if Beglar had a sympathy with Buddhism but Colonel Olcott in his diary mentioned that he and Anagarika Dharmapala had managed to get an interview with Beglar and asked for his support in getting control of the Mahabodhi Temple and that he had promised to do what he could to help.

In 1880 Beglar was chosen by the Bengal government to supervise repairs to the Mahabodhi Temple. It was a job that would require much more than his engineering skill; it would need a sensitivity to the temple's historical and aesthetic character and striking a balance between its role as both a heritage monument and the focus of the devotion of millions of Buddhists around the world. He proved to be the perfect person for the job.

Beglar visited Bodh Gaya in 1880 to assess what would be needed and came again the next year to start the work. When one considers what he eventually achieved it is actually quite remarkable. Apart from supervising nearly a hundred workers and craftsmen and keeping

within budget, he had to have thousands of bricks made to exact specifications, copy and then mould the plaster decorations for the sides of the temple, erect scaffolding as well as design and then make the bronze capital to top the temple's pinnacle. The most challenging job of all was what to do about the front of the temple which had completely collapsed taking half the second floor pavilion with it. Not knowing what the front of the temple originally looked like Beglar decided to just cement it over to prevent further decay or collapse. Fortuitously, just as he began doing this workers clearing rubbish found a tiny model of the temple, apparently a type of souvenir which used to be made to be sold to pilgrims in ancient times. This allowed Beglar to see what the front was originally like and also to discover that there was once been a small pinnacle on each of the four corners of the temple's plinth. Accordingly, he restored all this to the temple. He also restored all the small stone and masonry stupas around the temple, many of which had been knocked over during the Burmese attempted restoration. When the main job was completed Beglar decided to lay out a garden around the temple, selecting flowering trees that he knew in time would create a shady and cool ambiance for those who came to see it.

Before leaving Bodh Gaya Beglar had a memorial stone commemorating the repairs placed unobtrusively above the inside of the main temple entrance, much as ancient kings and others left records of their gifts to or repairs to the temple. It reads: "This ancient temple of Mahabodhi, erected on the holy spot where Prince Sakya Singha became



the Buddha, was repaired by the British government under Sir Ashly Eden, Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, Archaeological advisor to the government Major General A. Cunningham, Architect Joseph David Beglar 1880.” Loathe to give credit to those who had the foresight to save the Mahabodhi Temple from complete destruction this stone was plastered over after Indian independence so it can no longer be seen. But perhaps when today’s Buddhist pilgrims visits Bodh Gaya they should give some thought to the man who was mainly responsible for what they see and enjoy.



The Mahabodhi Temple after its renovation