



International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage

Volume 6

Issue 1 *Religion, Pilgrimage and Tourism in India and China*

Article 6

2018

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Recommended Citation

Geary, David (2018) "India's Buddhist circuit(s): A growing investment market for a "rising" Asia," *International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage*: Vol. 6: Iss. 1, Article 6.

doi:<https://doi.org/10.21427/D7PT46>

Available at: <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/ijrtp/vol6/iss1/6>

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India's Buddhist circuit(s): A growing investment market for a 'rising' Asia

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With the growing economic rise of Asia most of the international spotlight has focused on the rapid growth and industrialisation spearheaded by China and India, with little attention on the role of India's robust religious tourism market that remains a vital part of its economic growth. In recent years, the development and promotion of religious circuits has become a cornerstone of India's tourism marketing campaign that aims to capture both domestic and foreign exchange earnings. To explore the relationship between tourism and India's religious circuits further, this article examines the role of India's Buddhist circuit and how a series of sacred places have become part of a larger commoditised itinerary and networked geography. The article also looks at some of the tensions surrounding the ritual activities associated with Buddhist pilgrimage, how the government looks to regulate and reproduce a sacred geography, and the role of cross-border cultural and economic processes in shaping Buddhist heritage in the early twenty-first century.

Key Words: India, Buddhist circuits, religious tourism, development, inter-Asian connections

Introduction

In recent years, religious circuits have emerged as an important framework for tourism development and promotion in India. Designed to facilitate travel and provide tourism infrastructure at important sacred sites throughout the country, detailed projects involving significant financial investment are being prepared for Buddhist, Jain, Sufi, Christian, Sikh, and Hindu circuits, including a Sarv Dharma^[1] circuit designed to promote national integration across India's major living religions (Vishnoi 2012). According to the former Tourism Minister (2011-2012) and Indian National Congress member Subdoh Kant Sahay:

India is home to a number of religions and there is a huge scope in terms of boosting tourism to religious places . . . Our aim [he added], is to facilitate a packaged tour like experience to tourists complete with stay and entertainment options. We have already engaged consultants to work on these circuits and hope to engage state governments in the project (Vishnoi 2012).

In consultation with the Ministry of Tourism, Rs 9,450 crore (about US \$1.5 billion dollars) have been set aside for India's 12th Five-Year Plan (2012-2017) and the Ministry hopes to attract private investment close to Rs 28,000 crore (about US \$4.5 billion dollars) for such projects (SIGA Team, 2012). One group that has

taken an interest in developing India's Buddhist Circuit is the World Bank Group under the International Finance Corporation. In a 2014 feature article, the World Bank Group highlights the close partnership between the major international financing institution, India's Ministry of Tourism, the state governments of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, and private sector stakeholders with the goal of developing tourism infrastructure and identifying 'potentially transformative investments' along the major Buddhist pilgrimage sites in India (World Bank Group 2014). It is also anticipated that more than 10,000 jobs will be created through World Bank assistance, improving livelihoods for several low-income communities in this highly populated region of North India.

With Asia's economic rise in recent decades, most of the international spotlight has focused on the rapid growth and industrialisation spearheaded by China and India, with little attention on the role of India's robust religious tourism market that remains a vital part of its economic growth. In 2010, for example, according to estimates by India's Department of Tourism, approximately 60% of the country's 740 million

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1. Sarv Dharma is an Indian concept that is thought to originate among the ancient Hindu vedas, but was popularised by modern reformers such as Gandhi, Ramakrishna and Vivekananda. The term implies equality among all religions.

Figure 1 : Tourist Arrivals on the Buddhist Circuit

Destinations on the Buddhist Circuit	Tourist Arrivals 2014			10-Year CAGR			Nearest Airport (Distance in Km)	Travel Time (Hours)	Travel along the circuit (% of Bodhgaya)
	Domestic	International	Total	Domestic	International	Total			
Bodhgaya	16,47,701	2,25,668	18,73,369	21.0%	22.3%	21.1%	10	0.5	100%
Patna	18,17,439	9,097	18,26,536	2.2%	19.3%	2.3%	0	0.0	98%
Rajgir	15,25,107	1,64,314	16,89,421	18.8%	45.9%	20.0%	67	1.5	90%
Sarnath*	8,38,566	3,62,113	12,00,679	4.9%	7.6%	5.6%	10	0.5	64%
Lumbini	7,23,781	1,33,308	8,57,089	-	14.4%	-	10	0.5	46%
Kushinagar*	7,50,171	62,292	8,12,463	15.5%	21.3%	15.9%	223	4.5	43%
Vaishali	2,02,509	60,108	2,35,761	-1.6%	47.9%	0.0%	40	1.0	13%
Sravasti*	1,09,876	98,642	2,08,518	6.7%	16.7%	10.4%	177	5.1	11%
Kapilvastu*	1,61,434	30,219	1,91,653	40.7%	5.4%	24.6%	10	0.5	10%

* Nine Year Data (2005 to 2013) and CAGR

Source: HVS Research, Government of UP, Government of Bihar

Source : HVS Research (2015)

domestic travellers undertook some form of pilgrimage or religious travel. By contrast, foreign tourist arrivals numbered only 5 million in 2010, but both segments continue to grow, especially along India's Buddhist circuit (see Figure 1) where Asian pilgrims are coming in large numbers (Balasubramaniam, 2011; Department of Tourism, 2010).

As Timothy and Olsen (2006:1) acknowledge:

religious or spiritually motivated travel has become widespread and popularized in recent decades, occupying an important segment of international tourism.

With the rising economic influence of various parts of Asia, it is also believed that domestic and intra-regional mobility will soar over the coming decades (Daly and Winter, 2012). This increase in visitation to sacred sites has taken place alongside the investment in mass transportation infrastructure, restoration of ancient religious sites as part of cultural and UNESCO World Heritage, as well as the varying ways different state governments have used the allure of the metaphysical in tourism promotional literature (Timothy and Olsen, 2006; Geary, 2013). Seeing the economic potential of religious motivated travel in an increasingly globalised world, many state governments now look to the sacred as a potential resource that can be commodified and packaged in the tourism marketplace alongside the growth of other leisure activities.

To explore the relationship between tourism and India's religious circuits further, this article examines the role of India's Buddhist circuit and how a series of sacred places have become part of a larger commoditised itinerary and networked geography. I also look at the some of tensions surrounding the ritual

activities associated with Buddhist pilgrimage and how transnational Buddhist communities look to bypass governmental regulation and reclaim a sacred geography that may contravene the economic interests of Indian tourism authorities.

Before I turn to the case of India's Buddhist pilgrimage sites and recent efforts by the central and state governments to develop regional circuits, it is important to contextualise this pilgrimage activity within India's wider sacred geography and the role of archaeology, modern Buddhist pilgrims and national leaders in its reinvention.

India - A Sacred Geography: Exclusivity and Multiplication

It is well known that there is an extensive network of pilgrimage places stretching throughout the length and breadth of India. According to Diana Eck (2012:2) the entire land of India can be viewed as a

'great network of pilgrimage places - referential, inter-referential, ancient and modern, complex and ever-changing. As a whole, it constitutes what would have to be called a 'sacred geography', as vast and complex as the whole of the subcontinent.

Drawing attention to the living, storied, and intricately connected web of pilgrimage places and routes, Eck shows how the meanings associated with this sacred geography are not exclusionary and absolute but have an inherent capacity for multiplication. Eck writes:

The pilgrim's India is a vividly imagined landscape that has been created not by honing in on the singular importance of one place, but by the linking, duplication, and multiplication

of places so as to constitute an entire world. The critical rule of thumb is this: Those things that are deeply important are to be widely repeated. The repletion of places, the creation of clusters and circles of sacred places, the articulation of groups of four, five, seven, or twelve sites - all this constitutes a vivid symbolic landscape characterized not by exclusivity and uniqueness, but by polycentricity, pluralism, and duplication (Eck 2012:5).

Given these creative patterns of sanctification and the long history of multiplying the sacred in India's vast pilgrimage landscape, Eck remains critical of recent efforts by Hindu nationalists to 'liberate' sacred sites such as Ayodhya - the alleged birthplace of Ram. This discourse of religious exclusivity and uniqueness, she argues, is:

more typical of the monotheistic traditions of the West, now arising in a Hindu context in which patterns of religious meaning have traditionally been constructed on the mythic presuppositions of divine plurality and plenitude (Eck 2012:6).

Although these pilgrimage networks are part of a cultural landscape that is much older than the Indian nation-state, they are finding new symbolic expression among various communities of emotion and ritual practice such as the virulent forms of Hindu extremism.

Similarly, there is a long and pervasive history of connections between India's Buddhist sacred space and the influx of Asian pilgrims that precede the nation-state frame. Like the storied and mythic landscape of Hindu pilgrims described by Eck, this sacred topography has existed in the Buddhist imagination for many centuries and is undoubtedly tied to the historical and transcultural connections associated with the spread of Buddha's teachings or *sasana*. Through commercial trade networks and propagation by powerful leaders such as the Maurya emperor Ashoka, the teachings of the Buddha spread well beyond the South Asian arena giving rise to further creative interpretations and understandings of what constitutes India's sacred geography. As a trans-regional community of practice, the religion also underwent several complex doctrinal and ritual developments over numerous centuries, giving rise to different schools of Buddhist practice. Despite this incredible diversity throughout the Buddhist world, many adherents still look to India as the symbolic centre of the world, but, this sacred geography has never been static.

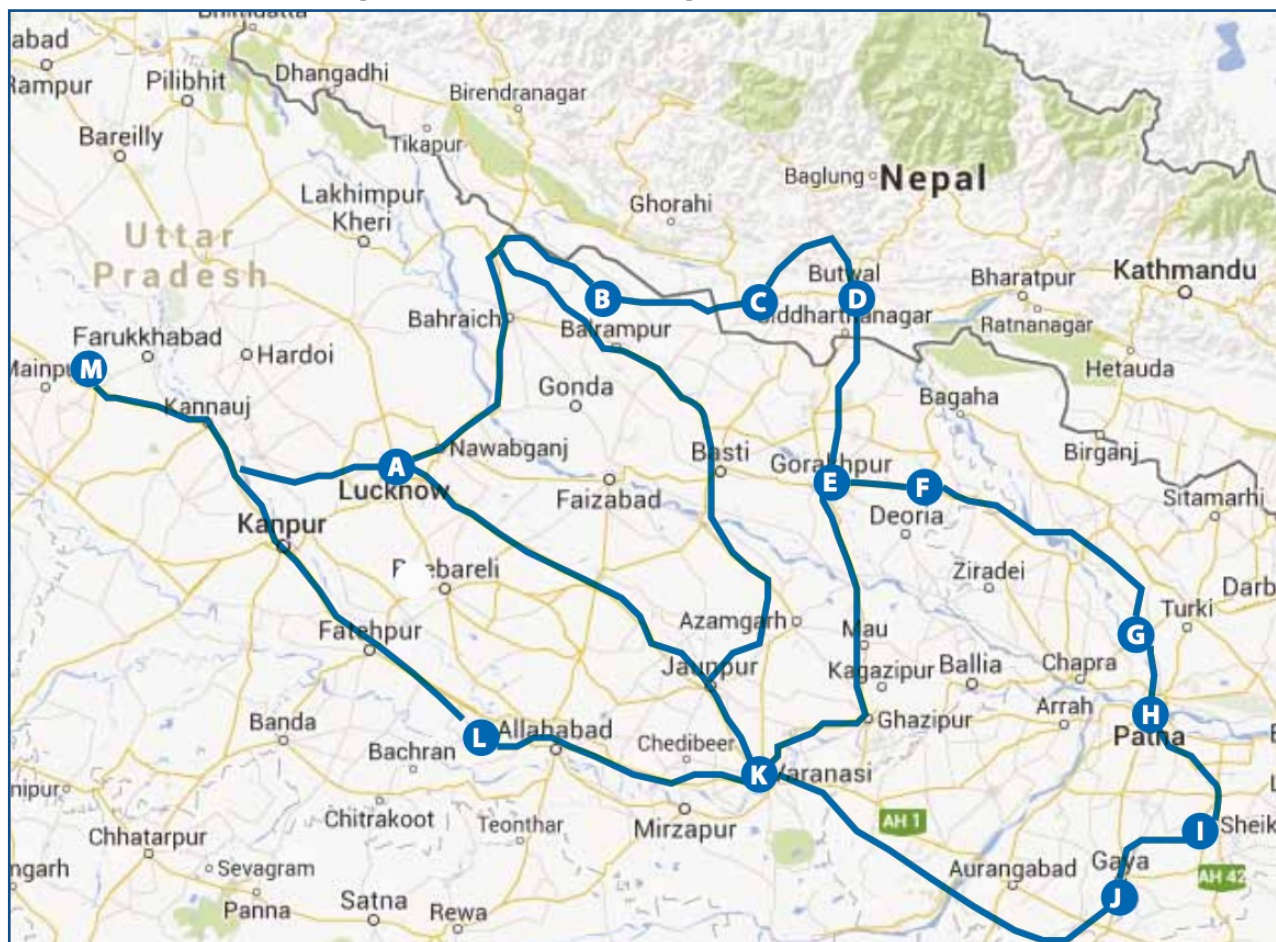
Like Diana Eck's concern for religious exclusivity at the expense of a more dynamic terrain of divinity, Toni Huber, in his book *the Holy Land Reborn* (2008), challenges some of the taken-for-granted modernist assumptions about the history of Buddhism in India, in particular, how the various 'sites of the Buddha' have been reconfigured as stable entities throughout the twentieth century at the expense of more fluid understanding of sacred space. What is widely considered and evoked as the authoritative discourse on Buddhist pilgrimage in India is the *Mahaparinirvana sutra*, according to which the Buddha recommends visiting four main sites associated with his life: the place of birth, the place of enlightenment, the place where the Buddha gave his first discourse, and the place where he passed away. Although the *Mahaparinirvana sutra* does not explicitly identify any of the four sites by name, over the last two centuries, these places have been identified as Lumbini, Bodh Gaya, Sarnath, and Kushinagar - based largely on archaeological findings and textual redactions in the nineteenth and early twentieth century.

Thus, prior to the modern reinvention of the Buddhist holy land, according to Huber, key surviving pilgrims' reports such as the Chinese pilgrim Faxian (*circa* 399-414 ADE) and Xuanzang (*circa* 630-645 ADE) simply fail to agree with the common identifications, partly due to the different variations of early Buddhist pilgrimage that involved contact with relics and sacred traces that led to an expanding ritual geography. Not only is this evident within India itself, as several secondary places became prominent centres of religious activity due to their association with relics and supernatural events, but also outside India, as evidenced by the diffusion of sacred space and Buddhist architectural replicas such as the Mahabodhi temple in Bodh Gaya, in other geographical locations such as Burma, Thailand, Sri Lanka and Tibet (Asher 2013). The logic of reproducing the sacred is clear, according to Huber:

since the physical presence of bodily and contact relics of the Buddha is what essentially constitutes a 'holy / sacred place' in South Asian Buddhism, the division and transfer of the same materials can serve to duplicate authentic and equally potent holy places of the Buddha outside of India (Huber, 2008:25).

In contrast to these patterns of sanctification, an important turning point in the modern rebirth of India's Buddhist pilgrimage sites was the role played by British Orientalists and antiquarians in the nineteenth

Figure 2 : Destinations Along the Buddhist Circuit



Source : International Finance Corporation (IFC), 2015

and early twentieth centuries who set out to rediscover and locate the 'original' sites of the Buddha in India (Almond, 1988; Trevithick, 2006; Lopez, 1995). As part of the essentialising quest 'to map out and anchor their fantasy of a pure 'golden age' of ancient Buddhism upon the Indian topography' (Huber, 2008:16) this archaeological rediscovery and restoration has led to the reification of a set of known, fixed sites associated with a singular tradition of Buddhism that has continued ever since.

Importantly, this modern rediscovery of Buddhist places in India was not 'merely derivative of certain discourses and practices from the colonial milieu of Protestant missionaries and orientalist scholarship' (Huber, 2008:9), but also grows out of convergences with modern Asian Buddhist practitioners such as the Sri Lankan revivalist Anagarika Dharmapala and the Maha Bodhi Society. As Huber writes:

It was only when these ideas crossed over into a world of real Buddhist practitioners that it actually gained a religious life of its own

outside of the domain of modern scholarly discourse (Huber, 2008:31).

This transmission of theory into practice has also played a key role in reinforcing a central geographic schema around the 'eight places of the Buddha' (now including Sravasti, Rajgir, Sankassa and Vaishali) that has become increasingly circulated and invoked in a variety of contexts:

both as the primary model for representing and understanding India as a sacred Buddhist terrain of pilgrimage and also as a basis for actual ritual practice among modern Buddhist converts (Huber, 2008:32 - see Figure 2).

Why has the schema been so pervasive in the twentieth and early twenty-first century and what role does tourism play in its ongoing reinvention and construction? Part of the answer to these questions lies in the varying ways in which Buddhism has been recast as a key symbol of India's national historiography that plays into ongoing diplomatic exchanges with neighbouring countries where the

cultural influence of Buddhism remains prominent. For example, shortly after India's independence in 1947, the government of India under Congress leader Jawaharlal Nehru, following an earlier colonial precedence, helped to elevate the international significance of the Buddhist pilgrimage sites through various restoration projects, scholarly publications, as well as diplomatic exchanges with royal dignitaries and foreign Buddhist communities to build monasteries and temples that largely cater to pilgrims from abroad. With the international celebration of the 2500th Buddha Jayanti, marking the birth anniversary of the Buddha Shakyamuni, the Buddha was widely celebrated as 'India's greatest son' and several investments were made in India's Buddhist geography to boost development and infrastructure for pilgrims abroad (Geary, 2014).

What is also abundantly clear in the late twentieth century is the reification of this central geographical schema through its anchoring in heritage projects and the creation of new tourism circuits. All of these projects of place-making have reinforced an immutable and uncontested set of pilgrimage sites that are strengthened by their alleged ties to an ancient Buddhist pilgrimage tradition now reconfigured and authorised as national and world heritage. Although Huber is not denying that many individual sites, like Bodh Gaya and Sarnath, have an ancient history of repeat patronage as places of pilgrimage for Buddhists over a long period of time, some of the earliest actual evidence associated with the Buddha reveals a much more dynamic sacred topography. As a distinctively modern shift, it is this triangulation between the production of scholarly knowledge, trends in religious practice, and efforts to promote this traffic via Indian tourism departments, that I wish to focus on further.

Circuits, Itineraries and the Cultural Economies of Tourism

It is well known that pilgrimage (and more recently tourism) has long played an important role in cross-border cultural and economic processes, but is there something new about the current configurations of global capital and religiosity in this neoliberal era? Before turning to the case of Buddhist circuits, I want to spend some time analysing the concept of 'circuits' in relation to itineraries and wider global economic processes and structures. As a noun, a circuit usually refers to a closed circular line; a path or route that involves a complete traversal of direction returning to a starting point. Frequently used in electrical engineering, circuits provide an important function as a

closed loop that allows a return path for the current. Thus, as containers of current and flow, broadly speaking, tourism circuits can be defined as key conduits for interconnection where the movement of people can be managed, serviced and coordinated through a concentration of sites and infrastructure.

How is the formulation of tourist circuits related to and / or different to itineraries? As Wang (2006) notes, the language of itinerary is frequently used in the tourism industry and promotional materials, but seldom discussed as an academic term. As a form of media used by the tourism industry for the production and consumption of the tourist experience, itineraries, like circuits, are key organisational forms but are rarely analysed by scholars. They are, in Wang's definition *temporal spatial-carriers* of the tourist experience and are significant because of the varying ways tourism is consumed and the tourists' experiences are shaped. As a 'system of links between the temporal and spatial arrangements of tourist activities,' according to Wang, the itinerary provides

a salable product that links, bridges, and puts together the various components that are necessary to the consumption of tourism. These components include accommodation, transportation, restaurants, attractions, entertainment, and tourist sites (Wang, 2006:67).

As the commodity form of mass tourism, itineraries provide tour operators and travel agencies with a product, but this product is primarily a nonmaterial form. Importantly, as Wang suggests,

the itinerary is nonmaterial because it is 'virtual' . . . existing in both tourists' and suppliers' imaginations; illustrated in tourist brochures, guidebooks, or TV programs; and only instantiated or materialized in the stage of consumption (Wang, 2006:67-68).

It is evident that there is considerable overlap between circuits and itineraries in terms of rationalising the tourist experience, creating the commodity form out of nonmaterial images and providing a means of circulating both people and tourism products. When then, did this trend towards the promotion of religious circuits by the Indian tourism department develop? Before answering this question, it is important to highlight that the recent leveraging of religious circuits as strategy for tourism development has a much earlier cultural and historical precedence in Asia. Drawing on the work of Aoki Tamotsu (1983), Eiki *et al.* (1997) suggest that pilgrimage in the Buddhist cultural sphere has generally been of a multi-sited circuit-type, while

those in Europe and the Middle East are single-line pilgrimages headed towards one major site or destination. Although this is likely an over generalisation, as Eiki *et al.* (1997, 277-278) suggest, the practice of going around (to a number of sites) continues to be of crucial importance to religious adherents in Asia - including the act of proceeding in a clockwise circumambulation - a style of ritual veneration that can be traced back to India and is common among Buddhists as a means of showing respect and accumulating merit. Although there has been no scriptural or modern attempt to standardise the direction by which one should visit the major Buddhist pilgrimage sites in North India and Nepal, as I mentioned in the previous section, India's Buddhist Circuit is modelled on a number of sacred sites related to the history and spiritual hagiography of the Buddha. The four main sites associated with India's Buddhist circuit are Bodh Gaya in Bihar, Sarnath and Kushinagar in Uttar Pradesh, and Lumbini in Nepal, but this has been expanded to include Rajgir and Vaishali in Bihar, and Sravasti and Sankassa in UP.

Returning to the Indian tourism department, according to Hannam and Diekmann (2011:17), the promotion of selective 'travel circuits' designed to maximise the benefits of tourism, gained wide currency following the first comprehensive tourism policy in India that was formulated in 1982. In the state of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, the development of a Buddhist circuit and / or sector was singled out as a key investment priority and the new Indian Tourism Industry set out to provide a detailed report on the development of tourist locations and bring them up to international standards. This led to an Action Plan for the Development of the Buddhist Circuit that was first launched in 1986 with four main objectives:

- 1) identify exact locations at which accommodation and mid-way facilities are required to be put up with central assistance;
- 2) identify sites where *stupas* can be constructed such as Piprahawa (Uttar Pradesh), Vaishali (Bihar) and Amravati (Andhra Pradesh) that will contain relics of the Buddha;
- 3) identify segments of national/state highways which need improvement and repairs to make them adequate for use by foreign and national tourist coaches and private cars and;
- 4) suggest a phasing of activities so that viable sectors can be commissioned without delay (Action Plan, Department of Tourism 1986).

These efforts to develop and promote the Buddhist circuit led to several master plans and tourism-related investment projects, including those funded by countries where Buddhism has a long cultural history such as Japan, who have been providing technical and financial assistance for conservation and infrastructural development projects under the Overseas Economic Cooperation Fund (OECD) and Japan Bank of International Cooperation (JBIC).

In my opinion, what is novel about these inter-Asian partnerships and bilateral aid agreements to strengthen the Buddhist circuit is that they exemplify a conscious shift on behalf of the Indian state towards a more outward looking demonstration of tourism reflexivity, built around a strategic investment in religion. In using the term 'tourism reflexivity' I am drawing on the work of sociologist John Urry who defines tourism reflexivity as

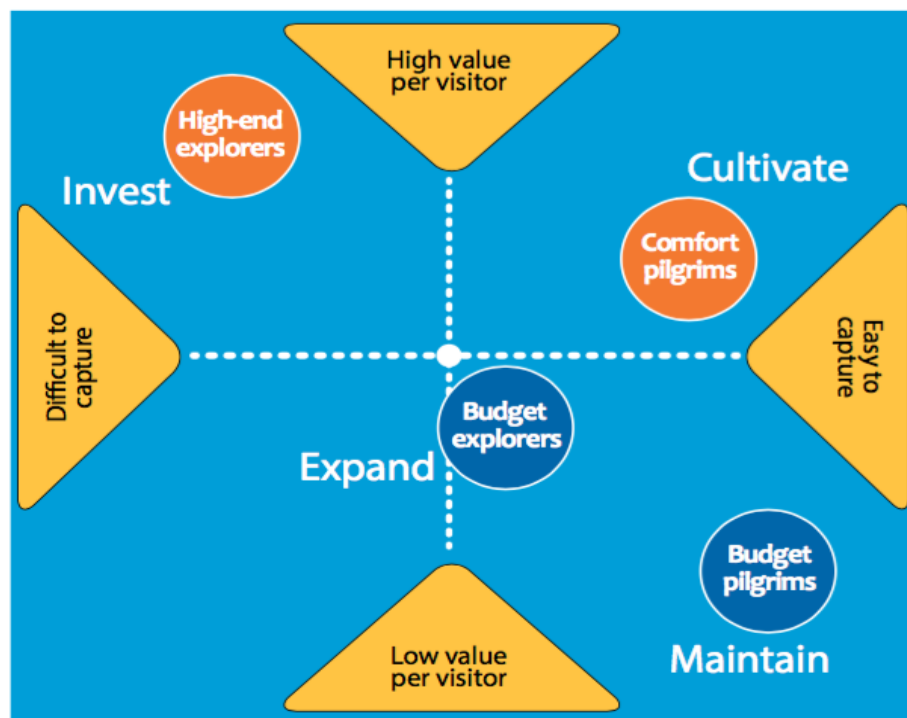
[a] *set of disciplines, procedures and criteria that enable each (and every?) place to monitor, evaluate and develop its tourism potential within the emerging patterns of global tourism* (Urry and Larsen, 2011:24).

Ever since the popular tourist campaign *Incredible India* was launched in 2002, the Ministry of Tourism has aggressively promoted the *Incredible India* brand in tandem with the concept of circuits around the world and through various overseas offices, especially in Asia (Geary, 2013). For example, in recent years the Ministry launched a media campaign aimed at tapping into source markets in East Asia, including Japan, as part of the 'Look East Policy' to get greater number of tourists with special interest in Buddhist sites.^[2] In this context, Buddhism, with its cross-border Asian cultural connections and historical ties, provides a significant investment opportunity that resonates with India's wider global nationalist vision.

One recent manifestation of these efforts to turn the Buddhist circuit into a world-class destination is the agreement reached in October 2013 by the Union Ministry of Tourism, the Departments of Tourism of the Governments of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, and the International Finance Corporation (World Bank Group) to upgrade the quality of services and goods provided for tourists in Bodh Gaya, Nalanda and Rajgir, Vaishali, Kapilvastu, Sarnath, Sravasti, Kausambi, and Kushinagar. As the main attractions on the circuit, the goal is to develop these destinations

2. Press Information Bureau, Government of India. 'Indo-Japan Cooperation in Tourism' accessed April 16, 2014, <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/erelease.aspx?relid=30231>

Figure 3 : Market Strategy Proposed by the IFC-World Bank for Different Buddhist Pilgrim Categories



Source : International Finance Corporation (IFC), 2015

along a value chain in order to serve as catalyst locations for an accelerated growth strategy. The central document published by the Government of India's Ministry of Tourism, and the International Finance Corporation entitled *Investing in the Buddhist Circuit, 2014-2018*, describes a guided framework to fast-track tourism growth along the iconic route where the Buddha spent his life over 2500 years ago, and unleash job creation opportunities by developing and promoting a 'mainstream tourism product' (International Finance Corporation, 2015:9).

The vision guiding the Buddhist Circuit investment scheme is to transform 'a collection of sites' into a 'holistic tourism experience' that will help support revenue opportunities and jobs to improve quality of local life around the Buddhist sites (IFC, 2015:18). Although both domestic and foreign tourism numbers have grown around the Circuit in recent years, indicating great potential for growth, thus far, arrivals from Buddhist dominated countries constitutes a mere 0.005 percent of an estimated 450 to 480 million Buddhists around the world (ibid:31). In other words, given the importance of the Buddhist Circuit in terms of 'the area where Buddhism originated and where the Buddha lived, the potential for Buddhist tourism expansion is enormous' (31). Supporting this vision will be the expenditure of 500 crore Indian rupees

(\$100 million) by the Indian government and private sector investment of an additional 500 crore from 2014 to 2018 (18).

Making a distinction between the experience of Buddhist pilgrims and other tourists highlights that for many tourists there is a need to improve interpretive and learning contact points to generate better knowledge of the sites and attract higher-spending visitors. Currently, the circuit is patronised by Buddhist pilgrims and most of them are relatively low spending travellers. Non-Buddhist travel has been very limited when compared to other popular leisure circuits and destinations such as the 'golden triangle' – a tourist circuit that connects the national capital Delhi, Agra and Jaipur. Thus, in terms of 'target market' profiles for future growth, the prospect visitors are separated into four main categories: budget pilgrims, comfort pilgrims, budget explorers, and high-end explorers (see Figure 3 - IFC, 2015:21-22). Although it is difficult to generalise about the visitor expenditure based on the above traveller types, what is suggested is that the most lucrative spenders are international travellers, especially those coming from Western countries and China.

Thus, the preliminary diagnostic data suggests that the main weaknesses in the Buddhist Circuit are 'limited

brand recognition and market reach' especially among non-Buddhist tourists and travellers, poor road and rail infrastructure and services (IFC, 2015:13-14). To resolve these weaknesses, in terms of positioning and branding the Buddhist Circuit, emphasis is placed on expanding the tourism market by appealing to a wide spectrum of potential visitors. In order to increase desire, three experience pillars are highlighted as key mechanisms for positioning and communicating the circuit brand: 'pilgrimage,' 'ancient heritage,' and 'mind, body, spirit' (ibid:19). This will be accompanied by a formal brand identity and logos consisting of a lotus flower symbol that will be printed and used on all electronic and promotional materials to market the circuit and provide a recognisable sign to endorse products and services for visitors. Thus, by 'mainstreaming' and 'packaging' the Buddhist Circuit 'story' and heritage more creatively, it is hoped that this will spur accelerated growth to increase tourism investment and business opportunities (IFC, 2015:15).

What is clear from the IFC document *Investing in the Buddhist Circuit, 2014-2018*, is that to facilitate certain control functions, including management of pilgrims and tourists, these new forms of territorialisation and investment tend to be along major circuits and / or sectors that are thematically connected. As Wang (2006:73) comments in her analysis:

Just like a certain type of cuisine produces some consistency in foods, itineraries also embody a certain theme or consistency in tourist experiences.

Increasing connectivity and volume along a set of circuits or packaged itineraries helps to provide 'quality-control' measures, managerial ownership and profit appropriation for the state government and invested agencies through a closed loop of economic activity. This organisational architecture, designed to facilitate the movement of people, also provides an opportunity, as I have shown, for state governments to mobilise public and private capital for planning functions and vast physical infrastructure developments through a mainstream tourism product. Married to projects of cultural heritage, such as UNESCO World Heritage, this also opens up new opportunities for urban redevelopment and the coordination of tourism functions between places, by appealing to the conservation of the past.

How is the experience of Buddhist pilgrims in India shaped by the production of itineraries and / or circuits? Tourism, is usually described as an activity of consumption, whereas pilgrimage is a journey of

devotion and sacred significance. Although the motivations behind tourism and pilgrimage-related travel are not so clear-cut and often blurred in practice, one of the trends we are seeing at the various Buddhist sites in India is that this networked geography to facilitate tourist consumption may be in competition with the investment in religious architecture and organisational infrastructure by transnational Buddhist communities themselves. This is clearly evident with the rising number of Buddhist monasteries, temples and guest lodges designed to facilitate these cross-border cultural flows. In some ways this is creating a parallel system and much of the economic activity of Asian pilgrims is being absorbed by these Buddhist institutions that cater to their cultural, linguistic and spiritual needs. Through donations (or *dana*) provided to the *sangha* and their contributions to the building of monasteries and / or temples (a significant part of accumulating merit during pilgrimage), we are seeing the consolidation of financial resources by transnational Buddhist communities and there is some concern by municipal authorities that these funds are not being reinvested at the local level (see Figure 4 and Figure 5).

Figure 4 : New signage in Bodh Gaya promoting tourism at the various Buddhist monasteries and temples.



Photo by author.

Figure 5 : The Mahabodhi Chinese Monastery in Bodh Gaya.

Photo by author.

Although tourism is frequently described as one of the largest employment generating sectors among poor communities in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, and certainly there is an emphasis on pro-poor tourism development as part of the investment scheme, one could also argue that these livelihoods can be threatened by large-scale conservation-heritage measures, urban beautification schemes, and new regulatory powers designed to showcase India's world class tourism. This is particularly acute in designated religious spaces where commercial and urban congestion are framed as an ongoing threat to the sacred sense of place. As I have witnessed in Bodh Gaya, the desire to fulfil the expectations of visitors seeking inward reflection, meditation and devotion, often comes at the expense of the urban poor, not to mention the remarkable inflation of land generated by major hotel chains and an expanding number of high financed Buddhist monasteries and temples. Although the demand for hospitality services remains an important part of any tourism destination, it is also increasingly difficult for the urban poor to compete for space and services when the informal economy of local bazaars and shops are increasingly seen as 'matter out of place' (Douglas, 1966; Geary, 2014).

Conclusion

Victor Turner (1973) has emphasised the importance of pilgrimage places as the 'center out there' typically on the periphery of society away from the profane social world, but he was also aware of their wider importance as loci of devotion within larger regional and transregional networks of markets and economies. In this article I have shown how a new grid of economic influence is taking place upon India's sacred landscape and these religious circuits have brought a significant level of development and considerable economic dynamism where the sacred and commerce come together.

Based on my preliminary research, I would argue that there are at least two main reasons that explain the trend towards the popularity of religious circuits in India today. First of all, there is the importance of connectivity and the centralisation of functions and facilities. With the increasing commoditisation of religious tourism built on international loans and public-private investment, circuits provide a key mechanism for pooling resources to maximize infrastructure and brand management. As an integral

marketing strategy for state governments, religious circuits help to standardise and segment the intangible experience of tourism into a thematised and saleable product (Wang 2006). Thus, in order to maximise the benefits of tourism for state government, and avoid potential expenditure leakage, this requires central coordination and control functions to manage tourist flows. Through investment in a spiritual itinerary built on a thematised value chain, this encourages a shift away from a single-line pilgrimage to a broader circuit journey that opens up new spaces of consumption.

Secondly, religious circuits provide a way of tapping into communities of emotion and ritual practice that can be used to strengthen national and cultural identity (such as the Sarv Dharma circuit), as well as provide significant economic benefits for the state. Although the main target audience, I would argue, remains the robust domestic pilgrim and tourist market, religious circuits also appeal to non-resident Indians and high-income pilgrim groups from abroad. This is clearly the case with India's Buddhist circuit that provides an enduring symbol of orientation for Buddhists' around the world, but especially in Asia, where the cultural influence of Buddhism is particularly robust. At the same time, the appeal of Buddhist heritage in pan-Asian terms, rather than strictly national or local experiences, has also paved the way for a significant revival movement that has contributed to a mushrooming of Buddhist monasteries and temples built on cultural-linguistic networks that may be in conflict with the aims of the state government and tourism agencies. It remains to be seen how the Indian state seeks to regulate and manage these Buddhist pilgrimage flows and the existing organisational infrastructure that supports them through various monastic centres and pilgrim lodging. Nonetheless, the elevated modern and secular construction of Shakyamuni Buddha as the apostle of compassion and peace remains attractive to many non-Buddhist tourists, who have an interest in the educational and historical aspects of Buddhism as Indian and world heritage.

In examining how sacred space becomes articulated with tourism circuits, I have also highlighted a few units of analysis that could be explored further. These include: a study of the organisational architecture designed to facilitate connectivity between sacred sites; the relationship between financial and devotional transactions that take place along these circuits, such as the prominent role of merit accumulation; new alliances and bilateral aid agreements between nation-state governments through the production of a pan-

Indo-Asian heritage, and more generally; questions of tourism commodification tied to global capital and how this articulates with the experience of pilgrims who may have different goals and values.

By way of conclusion I would like to return to the question of religious exclusivity and fixity at the expense of a more fluid, dynamic sacred terrain. Given the inherent capacity for multiplication in India's sacred geography (Eck, 2012), to what extent is India's Buddhist Circuit a threat to the 'shifting terrain of the Buddha' (Huber, 2008) or can these activities be interpreted as another form of reinvention? If contact with relics and sacred traces has led to an expanding ritual geography for Buddhists in the past and present, various state governments appear to have caught on to their multiplying potential and are mobilising their Buddhist archaeological and cultural assets to create new circuits of tourism influence. While the sites connected to the life and teachings of the Buddha are largely confined to the North Indian states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, there are several other spheres of Buddhist culture and history that are being targeted by state tourism departments in recent years. These include a new Himalayan circuit of Buddhist monasteries in Ladakh (Jammu and Kashmir), the Andhra Pradesh Buddhist circuit, the Orissa (Odisha) Buddhist circuit, and a Maharashtra Buddhist circuit where the popular Ajanta-Ellora caves are located. Despite his well known Hindu nationalist leanings, even the Prime Minister Narendra Modi has shown a keen interest in developing a Buddhist circuit in Gujarat, especially in his home town of Vadnagar, which has the remains of an ancient centre of monastic learning.

From a slightly different vantage point, the growing demand of India's Buddhist magnetism has also transferred into the sacred realm of international sporting events with the launching of the Formula One Indian Grand Prix. Designed by world-renowned German architect and racetrack designer, Hermann Tinkle, the Buddh International Circuit was inaugurated in 2011, cost upwards of \$400 million dollars, and is located in the Greater Noida area of New Delhi. Although this is not a direct reference to Shakyamuni and has more to do with where the racetrack was situated (in Gautam Buddh Nagar district), there is no doubt that there is a certain elective affinity between the two that was not lost on the circuit developers. While it remains to be seen whether or not the Buddh International Circuit can overcome taxation issues and corruption allegations to put India on the world motorsport map, surely India has a competitive edge in

the global marketplace of religiosity. How the Indian government values this treasured inheritance and legacy in the context of shifting Asian power and ascendant religious nationalism, could have repercussions well beyond the allure of exchange earnings.

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