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The Politics and Pathways of Return  
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Buddhist Homeland (June 28-29, 2019)  
A Conference Report

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[“The Politics and Pathways of Return: Trans-regional perspectives on a Buddhist homeland”](#) workshop/conference took place at the University of British Columbia from June 28 to 29, 2019. Sponsored by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, The Robert H. N. Ho Family Foundation Program in Buddhism and Contemporary Society, Community, Culture and Global Studies Department at UBC-Okanagan, Centre for India and South Asia Research, and the Tianzhu Network for the Study of Buddhist Cultures, the event featured two keynote speeches and six exploratory panels on the notion of Buddhist homelands in South Asian contexts.

At the opening session on June 28, two workshop organizers David Geary (University of British Columbia) and Sraman Mukherjee (Asoka University) introduced the conference’s background, its trans-regional approach, and the conceptualization of “homeland” and “moral geographies” as underlying theoretical frameworks.

The emphasis on a trans-regional approach is based on the recognition of the role of local and trans-local histories and interactions that extend beyond an Indo-centric analysis of Buddhism in modern India. It also goes beyond the perception of colonialism as the primary driver of religious reform and revival. In particular, the conference addressed the need to understand the connections between pre-colonial histories of circulation and movement, and recent networks of Buddhist restoration and revival in the subcontinent, and how these homeland attachments are reimagined under changing social, political and economic registers.

Geary remarked on the ambivalent use of “homeland” as a research category, citing awareness of the term’s antithetical connotation to Buddhist ascetic traditions of renunciation and the spirit of linguistic and cultural adaptability of Buddhist teaching, as well as its romantic nostalgic characterizations of a primordial sacred place which entails the nationalist discourse of regeneration and return. The concept of “homeland” is also closely related to the concept of “diaspora.” Thus, in Asian Buddhist contexts, it means looking at how religious diasporic communities and religious minorities in India socially, culturally, and politically negotiate their ties to both physical and imagined homelands.

Mukherjee continued the introduction by proposing the concept of “moral geography” as a means to further expand discussions around the idea of homeland. Drawing on Creswell’s definition of moral geographies that entail “the idea that certain people, things and practices belong in certain spaces and landscapes and not in others,”<sup>1</sup> Mukherjee framed the project of reimagining India’s sacred geography as “homeland” as a moral one in which moral values are imposed on the landscape, giving meaning to a Buddhist collective identity that transcends

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<sup>1</sup> Creswell, “Moral geographies,” 128.

language, nationality, and doctrinal differences. To examine how religious networks develop and establish their claim on Buddhist homeland based on moral geography, Mukherjee proposed two key conceptual frameworks: the recovery and reconfiguration of Buddhist material objects and spaces, and the complex interests and motivations of a range of Western and Asian actors in reinventing and reimagining South Asia as the “homeland” of Buddhism.

In closing remarks, homeland was described as a lens through which the tension around a Buddhist moral geography under the complex cultural politics of the nation-state can be explored.

Following the introduction, Session 1, chaired by Rongdao Lai (University of Southern California), featured papers by Arthur McKeown (Carleton College) and Dibyesh Anand (Westminster University). McKeown’s paper explored how the dynamic process of translation—the formal relocation of relics, has renewed the Mahābodhi complex into one of the most ritually dynamic places in the Buddhist world. Dibyesh Anand (Westminster University) continued by presenting on how the imaginations of India as Buddhist homeland and of Tibetans as “guests” in India are intertwined with the geopolitics of China-Tibet-India relations.

Sara Shneiderman (University of British Columbia) chaired the second session, which featured papers by Dannah Dennis (NYU Shanghai) and Elizabeth Williams-Oerberg (University of Copenhagen). Dennis’s paper analyzed ways in which diasporic Nepali Youtubers communicated the claim of Nepal as Buddha’s birthplace as a means of maintaining a connection to Nepal as a diasporic homeland and of marking themselves as global citizens. Williams-Oerberg continued with a presentation on the emergence of Ladakh as central global Buddhist pilgrimage destination in India, its global-local encounters and dynamics, as well as related issues.

The first day of the conference concluded with Max Deeg (Cardiff University)'s keynote speech titled "[‘Terra Sacra’ Imagined – ‘Terra Sacra’ Visited: Buddhist India in Pre-Modern Sources.](#)" Relying on Chinese "pilgrim records," Deeg argued that the imagination of Northern India as Buddhist "homeland" in the nineteenth century was the result of not only textual and architectural reconstruction of historical Buddhist India but also patterns and modes of pre-modern descriptions of the Buddhist sacred land.

On the second day of the conference, Session 3 began with Douglas F. Ober (University of British Columbia)'s paper which presented a case study of the Hindu MahaSabha and its influence on the MahaBodhi society, its relationship-building with Buddhists abroad, its vision of Hindu-Buddhist inclusivity, as well as its co-optation and exclusion of non-Brahmin Buddhist conversion movements. Padma D. Maitland (University of California, Berkeley) followed with a presentation on the development of modern Buddhist art and architecture as part of India's nationalist movement. The session ended with a paper by Catherine Becker (University of Illinois at Chicago) which focused on Buddhist art at the Sri Parvata Arama, a Buddhist theme park in Telangana, India, and its potential for "ecumenical" and transnational Buddhist experiences in the context of leisure activity. The session was chaired by Sraman Mukherjee.

Mitra Barua (Rice University) and Gajendran Ayyathurai (University of Göttingen) presented in session 4, which was chaired by Jessica Main (University of British Columbia). Barua's paper focused on the historical reconfiguration of Buddhist identity in Chittagong, and how it signifies the politics of returning to the Buddhist homeland and re-examines the dominant discourse of Indian Buddhism's demise in medieval India. Ayyathurai's presentation analyzed the process of Buddhism adaptation and its influence on the cultivation of casteless consciousness

and practices by the Tamils as a marginalized outcaste in the late nineteenth century.

Session 5, chaired by Doug Ober, opened with a paper by Alicia Turner (York University) which traced Burmese Buddhists' imagination and discourse of India and Indians from the nineteenth century to present. Gitanjali Surendran (Jindal Global Law School) continued with a presentation on fifty years of Buddhist network building between India and Burma in the first half of the twentieth century and its significance to the two nations after 1947.

Session 6 continued with papers by Marieke Bloembergen (Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies (KITLV)), and John Marston (El Colegio de México in Mexico City). In her presentation, Bloembergen examined the meaning and relevance of (Buddhist) "homeland," "return," and "moral geographies" concepts to Indonesian actors who travelled extensively between India and (post-) colonial Indonesia and participated in the resacralizing activities at Buddhist-cum-heritage sites in Java from 1910s to 1960s. Marston concluded the session with a paper on The Nalanda Pali Institute, its influence on the new internationalization of Buddhism and involvement in the "Cold War Buddhism" with references to Cambodian monks attending the school in the 1950s and 1960s. The session was chaired by David Geary.

The conference concluded with a keynote speech by Anne Blackburn. Titled "[The Promise of Precedent: Magadha, Laṅkā, and Bago](#)," she suggested that the Kalyāṇi Inscriptions composed in 1470s Bago (Burma Delta region) for the court of King Dhammazedi reveal the ways in which imagined geographies of Buddha-sāsana were drawn into premodern local royal and monastic practice outside the Indian subcontinent.

### **Bibliography**

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