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The two giants of religious tolerance - Buddhism and Hinduism - are locking horns over custodianship of the Mahabodhi temple in Bihar. Fundamentalist factions from both faiths are playing tug-of-war with a shrine where devotees of both faiths have worshipped side-by-side for decades. The problem erupted when the state government tried to tried to change the management - now half Hindu and half Buddhist - to all-Buddhist. State Minister Yadav stood to gain a large Buddhist voting bloc if the law passed. A near-violent Hindu objection surprised him.

Historically, this Buddhist wealthy shrine is where Gautama achieved enlightenment 2,500 years ago. It is for Buddhists their Mecca, their Ayodhya. Hindus base their claim on a Siva lingam nestled into the temple in 602 CE and still worshipped. Others claim the Pandava brothers and their wife Draupadi performed final rites there for kinsmen lost in the Mahabharata war.

In 1590, Mahant Gossain Ghamandi Giri established a Hindu mutt there and gradually took control of the shrine. But by 1877, it was in disrepair. The king of Burma, a Buddhist, sent a team to repair it but they were blocked by Hindus. In 1903, the British Viceroy proposed a compromise where Buddhist and Hindu priests jointly manage. This became law in 1949 as the Bodhgaya Temple Act with an 8-member, half-Buddhist, half-Hindu committee, overseen by the local magistrate. But he was usually Hindu which tilted justice and tested Buddhist emotions.

District authorities fear clashes between the militants among both the Buddhist and the Hindus during the winter months, when Buddhists from all over the world visit on pilgrimage.

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