

Bigger, better, cooler karma

As the Taliban destroy Afghanistan's Buddhist icons, plans are advanced for the erection of a giant new one, in India

BY AUSTIN WILLIAMS

Varanasi is one of the holiest places of pilgrimage for Hindus all over India, and something of a tourist trap.

It is also reputed to be one of the most densely populated cities in the country. Millions regularly come to bathe, or be cremated, at the *ghats* (steps) leading down to the Ganges. But just 120 miles south-east of Varanasi, across the state border in Bihar province – the poorest region in India – lies Bodhgaya, a rural town of 25,000 people, the centre of a totally different tradition.

Here Buddha is reputed to have found enlightenment, 2,500 years ago, after sitting under a Bodhi tree for 90 days. This less-developed area is home to a more sedate form of pilgrimage, and the town looks like it has not changed in decades. But it is set for much more.

Work has just started on a masterplan for the town; the central focus will be the 152m-tall statue of the seated Buddha – the biggest ever. The 'd. Con- tion w million profes

'The architectural challenge has been to turn a monumental engineering project into a subtle spiritual retreat on a human scale'

ment cooperation on a global scale with design team members based in the UK and construction professionals based in Asia.

Standing tall

The masterplan comprises a range of ancillary accommodation and landscaping surrounding the massive focal point. The perimeter of the site is determined by a circular, three-storey wall of accommodation, which will house a monastery, convent, office, guest house, library, restaurant and a large number of visitor numbers.

