



AYODHYA

FOLLOWING RAMA: THE RAMAYANA

Kashi (Varanasi, U. P.), Kanchipuram (Tamil Nadu), Mayapuri (Haridwar, Uttaranchal)
Ayodhya (U.P.), Avantika (Ujjain, M. P.), Mathura (U. P.), Dwaravati (Dwarka, Gujarat)



The Ramayana is the most beloved epic of India. The story of Rama, the “Journey of Rama,” penetrates Hindu consciousness and culture to the extent that it is almost universally known. In our explorations of sacred geography, we note immediately that because the legend is based on a journey, it creates a landscape and a map. The footprints of the heroes and heroines of the Ramayana are tracks that we can follow through the land of India.

This article is a researched article and borrows heavily from printed and electronic encyclopedias as well as material provided by our panel of research scholars, astrologers, academics and pundits. Also, this article is majorly an extraction and adaptation from the book “India A Sacred Geography” by Diana L. Eck

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The great city of the Rama legend is Ayodhya, known to the Puranas as one of the - Saptapuris - the seven moksha - granting cities of India. Present - day Ayodhya sits on the banks of the Sarayu River in north India, adjacent to the

modern city of Faizabad. The Sarayu, spanned now by a new rail bridge, is said to flow from Lake Manasa in the high Himalayas at the foot of sacred Mount Kailasa. It is in some ways a dilapidated town, with the relentless problems of poor electrical service, poor roads, and poor sanitation that plague so many towns of its size. Pilgrimage is its primary business, and tens of thousands of pilgrims flock to Ayodhya during its great pilgrimage seasons. They come especially for the panchakrasi pilgrimage circumambulating Ayodhya during the Ramnavami festival celebrating the birth of Rama in the spring month of Chaitra, in April-May.

The legends of Ayodhya cast the mythic imagination back to the time of King Sagara and his grandson Bhagiratha, famous for bringing the River Ganga from heaven to earth. Like many of the sacred places of India, Ayodhya has a complex

history, layered with Jain and Buddhist, Shaiva and Vaishnava traditions, and one that has been studied by many historians. Ayodhya is no doubt a very old place. Archaeologists have dated some of the remains of the Ramkot area of the city to the seventh century B.C.E, when this was the capital of the ancient Kingdom of Koshala. The city was known in the ancient Buddhist world of north India as Sakita, a place visited by the Buddha himself in the sixth century B.C.E Sakita was also important to the Jains as the traditional birthplace of Rishabha, the first of the tirthankaras, the spiritual “ford-maker” of the tradition. For Hindus, Ayodhya was and is associated with the legendary events of its most celebrated son, Rama, the descendant and rightful heir of the throne of the Solar kings. From the time of Valmiki’s Ramayana, the name of Ayodhya, the “Unconquered,” has been

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linked with the saga of Rama as hero and king. The model of the god-king, Rama held a powerful place in the structure of Hindu kingdoms across India. But to understand Ayodhya as a center of religious devotion to Rama, we look to the more recent past. The careful historical and textual work of scholars has placed the beginnings of the actual worship of Lord Rama in Ayodhya in the eleventh or twelfth century C.E,

The popularity of Ayodhya as a place of devotion and pilgrimage may be an even more recent phenomenon. The emergence of Rama's Ayodhya has many parallels to the "rediscovery" of the sites of Braj associated with the legend of Krishna. This bhakti devotional spirit that focused on Rama began in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. The bhakti saint Ramananda popularized Rama devotion during his lifetime, in the latter half of the sixteenth century. His influence spread with the many bhaktas who counted themselves as his disciples, such as Kabir and Tulsidas. Hans Bakkar, who has translated and annotated the Ayodhya Mahatma, for instance, the most important site associated with Rama is the Svargadvara, the "door to heaven" a bathing tirtha along the

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Ramapanchayan, Raja Ravi Varma (Lithograph)



The central figures of the Ramayana: Rama, his wife Sita, the devotee Hanuman and Rama's three brothers (Lakshmana, Bharata and Shatrughna)

Sarayu River where tradition holds that Rama ascended to heaven at the end of his life. Of course, later popular mahatyam also extol Rama's birthplace, the Janmasthan, and other nearby sites associated with the Rama legend, such as Sita's palace called Kanaka Bhavan and the basement chamber known as Sita's kitchen, but these are not part of the older mahatyam tradition.

It is important to note that many sites of Shiva are not only mentioned, but praised in the various versions of the Ayodhya Mahatyam. Indeed, among the most important deities of the city is Nageshvaranatha, Lord of the Nagas. Even today, pilgrims who make their way down the slippery bank to bathe at

Svargadvara in Ayodhya will find this Shiva temple right next to the bathing ghat. This temple is not simply one of the many to be found adjacent to the ghats. On the contrary, priests will tell the pilgrims that without the worship of Shiva Nageshvaranatha one will not reap the benefits of pilgrimage to Ayodhya. This linga is said to have been established by Rama's own son Kusha. According to Hans Bakker, Nageshvaranatha "is considered the presiding deity of Ayodhya." The present temple dates to the eighteenth century, but the tradition of such a kshetrapala, or "territorial protector," is clearly much older. It is well known that Shiva, like the Buddha, gathered into his entourage in ancient north India both



Raja Ravi Varma, Shree Rama Crossing Sarayu River



The Sarayu (also Sarju) is a river that flows through the Indian states of Uttarakhand and Uttar Pradesh. This river is of ancient significance, finding mentions in the Vedas and the Ramayana. The Sarayu forms at the confluence of the Karnali (or Ghaghara) and Mahakali (or Sharda) in Bahraich District. The Mahakali or Sharda forms the Indian-Nepalese border. Ayodhya is situated on the banks of river Sarayu. Some mapmakers consider the Sarayu to be just a section of the lower Ghaghara River.

On Ram Navami, the festival that celebrates the birthday of Lord Rama, thousands of people take a dip in the Sarayu River at Ayodhya.

The river is mentioned three times in the Rigveda. The banks of the Sarayu are the location of the slaying of two Aryas at the hands of Indra in RV 4.30.18. It is listed together with western tributaries to the Indus: Rasa, Anitabha, Kubha, Krumu, and the Sindhu itself as obstacles crossed by the Maruts in RV 5.53.9. In this verse, Purisini appears as its epithet. At this stage of the earlier Rigveda, it apparently was a river west of the Indus system that corresponds to Iranian Harayu (Avestan acc. Haroiium, Old Persian Haraiva, modern Hare), the Herat river. It is invoked together with Sindhu and Sarasvati (two of the most prominent Rigvedic rivers) in the late hymn RV 10.64.

Later on, according to Ramayana 1.5.6, the Sarayu flowed beside the ancient city of Ayodhya, which is in the modern day Uttar Pradesh. It was a tributary of the Gogra. This Sarayu played a vital role for the city and life of Ayodhya, and according to the great Sanskrit epic Ramayana, is where Rama, the seventh Avatar of Vishnu immersed himself to return to his eternal, real Mahavishnu form, when he retired from the throne of Kosala. His brothers Bharata and Shatrughna also joined him, as did many devoted followers. The Sarayu is also the river upon whose banks King Rama was born.

According to a sub-story within the Ramayana, the banks of the River Sarayu is also the place where King Dashratha accidentally killed Shraavan Kumar.

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the popular cults of the nagas and the yakshas, the guardian deities associated with pools and groves. Bathing at Svargadvara and honoring Shiva as Ksheptrapala is said to be the foundation of Ayodhya pilgrimage. As Peter Van der Veer put it in his study of Ayodhya, "The most important of the many temples on the ghats are undoubtedly those dedicated to Shiva,

even though Ayodhya is the place of Ram."

Going from the riverbank into the streets of the town of Ayodhya, pilgrims quickly find that the liveliest shrine in all Ayodhya today is that of Hanuman Garhi, the fort of Hanuman. They climb up a long staircase to this hilltop temple, a marble temple compound at the heart of the city of Ayodhya where, again, the primary deity in the

sanctum is not Rama. It is his chief devotee, Hanuman, who offers his darshan from beneath a mountain of marigold garlands and gladiolas. His image is covered with orange sindur, and only his orange face is visible, with silver eyes and a silver vertical Vaishnava marking on his forehead. Around the perimeter of the temple compound are smaller shrines where pilgrims will find

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images of Rama, Sita and Lakshmana. The walls are covered with tiles bearing the names of Rama and Sita. But the primary deity here is Hanuman. Garhi is the center of Ayodhya's religious life. As one of the contemporary mahatyam's of Hanuman Garhi puts it, "When Sri Rama, the lord and master of Ayodhya, was about to return to his eternal abode, he handed over the charge of defending Ayodhya to Hanuman. From then on, Hanuman was regarded as the lord and ruler of Ayodhya."

The importance of the city as a tirtha is much broader than Rama legend, much broader than any single temple or ghat. As a tirtha, Ayodhya is one of the (Saptapuris) seven cities that bestow liberation, and its power is not linked to Rama alone, but includes its presiding deity, Shiva, and its present guardian, Hanuman.



Lord Hanuman

Hanuman is an important link between Rama and Shiva, since the monkey-god is often regarded as the son of Shiva and even as a manifestation of Shiva. Indeed Bakkar notes that devotion to Hanuman was already well established among Shaiva sannyasis before the cult of Hanuman rose to popularity within Rama bhakti. The author of the modern Hanuman Garhimahatmya links the importance of Hanuman at Ayodhya to that of Shiva, saying, "Hanuman is regarded as the eleventh Rudra, an incarnation of Shiva. So in and around Ayodhya, Hanuman Garhi and Nagesvarnath are regarded as places of prime importance. Pilgrims who come to Ayodhya first of all bathe in the river Saryu and pour a jug of water at Nagesvarnath. Then they worship Hanuman and return

home. Most of these pilgrims are not aware of the importance of the birthplace of Sri Rama or of Kanakabhavan."

The mahatyam perhaps overstates the case. Rama's sites are clearly very important in Ayodhya and have been so for perhaps five hundred years. At the same time however, the history, literature, and ritual life of Ayodhya remind us that the importance of the city as a tirtha is much broader than Rama legend, much broader than any single temple or ghat. As a tirtha, Ayodhya is one of the (Saptapuris) seven cities that bestow liberation, and its power is not linked to Rama alone, but includes its presiding deity, Shiva, and its present guardian, Hanumana. ■