

# SRI RAM JANAM BHOOMI / BABRI MASJID IN AYODHYA

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## ABSTRACT

*Concerning the location of Rama's birth, in the only source we have about him, viz. the cluster of Rama narratives, there is a near-consensus that it is Ayodhya. The one exception is the Rama narrative in the Buddhist Jataka 461, the Dasharatha Jataka (last centuries BC), which, without going in any detail about his birth, generally locates the dynasty's court in Kashi. It diverges rather much from Valmiki's Ramayana, esp. with Sita being Rama's sister before becoming his wife, possibly alluding to the close endogamy practiced in the Buddha's own Shakya tribe. The story's main point is to claim Rama as an earlier incarnation of the Buddha, which testifies to the importance Rama already enjoyed in the collective imagination during the last centuries BC. Thus Rama is important not just in Brahminism but also in Buddhism, which launched the claim that the Buddha was a reincarnation of Rama. This story of Buddhist origin was later incorporated in the doctrine of the ten incarnations of Vishnu, now oddly rejected by the neo-Buddhists as a trick of the wily Brahmins to neutralize the Buddhist challenge to oppressive Brahmanism. The Buddha himself and several of his best-known disciples, as well as a number of philosophers in successive phases of Buddhism, are said to have dwelled in Ayodhya or in Saketa, a settlement founded by a contemporary of the Buddha "very adjacent to and probably at the outskirts of the old town of Ayodhya".*

## INTRODUCTION

Ayodhya is important in Jainism too, which identifies it as the birthplace of some of the earlier Tirthankaras and has Mahavira Jina visit the town too. Rama and Ayodhya are entirely central to the Vaishnava school that later became known as Sikhism. Guru Govind Singh claimed Rama as a direct paternal ancestor for both founder Guru Nanak and for himself. Which is why Guru Nanak went on pilgrimage to Ayodhya shortly before Babar's invasion where he claims to have had Rama's *darshan* (solemn seeing of the deity, in practice: of the deity's temple idol), though without giving details of where exactly and in what conditions. To

all who have continued to care about Rama, there is no other birthplace for him than Ayodhya. This also fits in with the larger Puranic narrative of ancient India, confirmed in other Buddhist sources, which locate the entire Ikshvaku dynasty and its ancestor Manu in Ayodhya. There is admittedly a problem with the continuity at the site. Hindu tradition itself (chiefly the Skanda Purana) has it that after Rama, his city was abandoned by its population and later rediscovered. This tallies with Buddhist testimony: "The early Buddhist literature, however, mentions the occurrence of flood at the place and it may have caused the migration of the population to some place nearby." [Pandey 2009:16] The rediscovery is ascribed to one Vikramaditya, taken by traditionalists to be the founder of the Vikram

Samvat calendar in 57 BC, while secularists identify the name as the honorific of Chandragupta II, ca. 400 CE. Skeptics may say that this tradition masks a purely arbitrary identification of a convenient site with the prestigious but by then legendary and lost Ayodhya of yore (the way Krishna devotee Chaitanya Mahaprabhu in 1515 decided by means of visionary intuition the location of Vrindavan, the place where Krishna grew up). However, Buddhist and Jain sources, generally more securely datable than epic and Puranic data, assure a continuity in their location of Saketa/Ayodhya (names alternately referring to different parts of the city or to the city as a whole) from centuries before the first to centuries after the second Vikramaditya.

Even the one major revisionist theory concerning the Ramayana's geography confirms this location. H.D. Sankalia, in his book *Ramayana, Myth or Reality?* (published by a Communist house), argues that the Ramayana's southern toponyms Kishkindha and Lanka refer to places in or north of the Vindhya mountains, because the core data of landscape and flora fit those areas and not more southerly ones. He concludes: "Lanka of this Ravana was in the Chotanagpur plateau (...) probably near Jabalpur. All this area, Ramayana expressly tells us, was included in Rama's kingdom, i.e. (southern) Kosala; (...) Thus in the original Ramayana, the entire episode took place in a compact geographical area." [Sankalia 1991:60-61] "But the mistake started with the wrong identification of the river Godavari, and Dandakaranya. The Ramayana clearly mentions that they were within easy reach of the hill Chitrakuta. Here were Panchavati, Rishyamuka, Pampa, Kishkindha and Lanka (...) north of the Narbada." [Sankalia 1991:46]

Yet by the same yardstick he finds in favour of the classical locations of Ayodhya and the nearer toponyms: "Rama was an illustrious descendant of the Ikshvaku dynasty with its capital at Ayodhya. For this statement though there is no contemporary (historical) record, still this fact is vouchsafed by all the Puranas and early Jain and Buddhist traditions which are not later than the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC." [Sankalia 1991:42] "What has resulted from the

archaeological approach to the Ramayana is briefly this: (i) there is no doubt that the existence of Ayodhya and other cities mentioned in the Ramayana such as Kausambi, Mithila, Kanyakubja at least by 1000 BC; (...) (iii) the core of the Ramayana story – viz. Rama, Sita, Lakshmana and the exile of Rama with Sita and her being abducted by Ravana – was true (...)." [Sankalia 1991:60-61] As for the chronology: "The origins of the Ur-Ramayana might go back to a period between 1500 and 1000 BC". [Sankalia 1991:57] The expansion of its geographical horizon to include South India followed later: "The greatest interpolation seems to have taken place between the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC and the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD, when descriptions of Lanka, Ayodhya, Kishkindha came to be entirely recomposed." [Sankalia 1991:61]

Among the changes effected in the narrative, one was to bring the material setting up to date. The classical narrative has the heroes use chariots and metal weapons, including even the fanciful *vimana*, a kind of helicopter. But the core data are far more primitive: Rama uses bow and arrow, a prehistoric weapon, and Hanuman even uses a mace, the crudest weapon of all. Those who cling to a high chronology for the Ramayana events, and who are disappointed by the failure of the archaeologists to find any buildings there at an appropriate time-depth, might take heart from this insight: perhaps Rama's original "palace" was a primitive and perfectly perishable construction? As Sankalia [1991:44] notes:

"We are told that when Kaushalya learnt of Rama's exile, she fainted and fell down on the floor and her body was covered with dust. (2:15:18) But if this floor was made of brick or made with stones, as the palaces are supposed to be, how or why should there be dust on the floor? I think this small insignificant detail, overlooked by the poet, possibly gives us a clue to the real nature of the original houses at Ayodhya. These houses, though big, should be of mud or mud-brick, as has been exposed in our excavations outside the Indus civilization." But even then, Sankalia implies, such primitive habitation tends to leave at least some traces for archaeologists to discover, which have not been

found in Ayodhya prior to 1300 BC. So for now, the data cannot satisfy the traditionalists: either Rama lived elsewhere, or he lived at an age much later than what Hindu tradition teaches. The last straw for them to clutch at, is the new hypothesis that a flood took place in the early 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC, due to tectonic events that also caused a shift in the Yamuna's riverbed which originally fed into the Saraswati (making it the mighty stream described in the Rg-Veda until, after this shift of its main tributary's course, it shriveled and ran dead at a place in the desert to which Krishna's brother Balarama went on pilgrimage during the Mahabharata battle). This flood destroyed the archaeological evidence of Rama's Ayodhya: "The floods had washed away the constructions of this period. All the archaeological remains (...) were of the post-flood period and nothing before." [Hari & Hari 2010:80] This fits with Buddhist literary testimony of a flood, as mentioned. In that case, the search can start all over.

## WHERE WAS RAMA BORN?

What has caught most attention in the Court verdict is the Court's acceptance of the Hindu claim on the site as *Rama's birthplace*: "When Hindus believe that the place of birth of Lord Rama was within the disputed site of the Ayodhya temple, such belief partakes the nature of essential part of religion and is protected under Article 25 of the Constitution (right to profess one's religion), the Lucknow Bench of the Allahabad High Court has held." [Venkatesan 2010] For one, critics didn't accept that this belief was all that well-established even among Rama worshippers: "The 'faith and belief' that the court speaks about today acquired salience only after the Vishwa Hindu Parishad and the Bharatiya Janata Party launched a political campaign in the 1980s to 'liberate' the 'janmasthan'." [Varadrajan 2010:9] Historically, this is obviously incorrect, for the belief has already been attested in a number of European and local Muslim sources from 1608 onwards, and Hindu-Muslim clashes over the site had already taken place in 1855 and 1935. Opponents of a new temple could have argued that the pre-existence of

this belief, long before the 1980s, was still no reason for the Court to endorse it; but the fact that this belief is long-standing, must be acknowledged.

The Aligarh Historians' Society (AHS), led by Irfan Habib, argues that Rama's association with the site is only attested in Sanskrit literature, where it may have been smuggled in through later interpolation, but is not in evidence in firmly datable inscriptions. The group lists, apart from three inscriptions without religious content, two pre-Muslim inscriptions referring to Ayodhya as a religious centre that mention Vedic experts, Lord Shiva and Lord Krishna, but not Lord Rama. In an inscription from ca. 1100, claimed by the temple activists to have been discovered during the Babri demolition in 1992, they find Shiva as the main deity, and Vishnu mentioned with four of his incarnations, among them "he who killed the wicked ten-headed one", i.e. Rama who killed Ravana. So, Rama only makes a peripheral appearance. They conclude: "Such is the evidence of inscriptions which unlike many Sanskrit texts can be dated fairly precisely (...) Nowhere do we find in them any remote reference to the sanctity enjoyed by Ayodhya as the birthplace of Rama." [AHS 2010:24]

That only says the worship of Rama was not yet that important before 1100, that Rama's status as a divine object of worship only caught on gradually. It is well-known that the worship of Vishnu's incarnations grew as part of the wave of *Bhakti* (devotionalism) in the last half of the first millennium CE, along with the re-centring of cultic practices in temples, unknown in the Vedic period when worship took place in the open air. In the beginning of this wave, inscriptions celebrating Rama as a deity are few and far between in the whole of India, but the fashion finally picked up, partly in response to the Muslim conquests, when the Hindus felt the need for a warrior god.

But the initial paucity of inscriptions praising Rama says nothing about the tradition that Rama was born at the disputed site. When admirers of a famous person try to locate the house of his birth and perhaps develop it into a museum and tourist attraction (or in ancient parlance, a place of

pilgrimage), they have to inquire from the locals who knew the house of his birth all along, even before he became famous, even before anyone thought of going on pilgrimage there. So, even before attracting pilgrims from all over India eager to visit Rama's birthplace, there may very well have been a local tradition about where to find the ancient castle of the Ikshvaku dynasty to which Rama belonged.

This question is part of a larger one: is the Ramayana "mere myth", as the anti-temple party insists? If not, what do we know about the location of the story's main events? First of all, pure fantasy is a modern invention, ancient legends have typically grown around a factual core. A classical myth is rarely a "mere" myth. In the 18th and 19<sup>th</sup> century, proudly modern and skeptical of premodern beliefs, the Greek tradition of the Trojan war as described in Homer's *Iliad* was dismissed as a "mere myth". But in 1868 amateur archaeologist Heinrich Schliemann conducted excavations in Hisarlik at the site indicated in Homer's epic and found successive cities on top of each other, one of which is now accepted by the scholarly community as the city figuring in the 13<sup>th</sup> century BC war described by Homer in the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC. In addition, the Anatolian language group was discovered (decipherment of Hittite by Bedrich Hrozný 1915, later also Luwian), and it turned out that Troy's other name, *Ilion*, from \**Wilion*, corresponds to the Hittite place name *Wilusa*, while the name *Priam* of Troy's king is explained as a Luwian name, *Priimuua* ("very brave"). So, Homer embellished a traditional report of an actual historical event. Likewise, the Ramayana may well be an embellished evolute of a description of actual events. Secondly, the demand for proof of the Ramayana only makes sense if it is possible in principle to prove the existence of a man living in the preliterate age. In the 1970s, Prof. B.B. Lal's excavation campaign "Archaeology of the Ramayana sites" [Lal 2008:15-28] found a common material culture at Ayodhya, Chitrakuta and other Ramayana sites all datable to a common period, viz. the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC. It earned him the wrath of an audience of traditional Hindu godmen, who tend to place the Ramayana events at a far greater time-

depth. [related in Noorani 2003:1:68] (As Lal told me, his reply to them was: "I don't say so, but my spade tells me so.") Beyond that very general information, archaeology cannot bring us much closer to Rama. Unlike in the case of Greece and Troy, no inscriptions exist from any age ever allotted to the Ramayana events, for in the Gangetic plain, literacy only appeared around the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC. The writing of the Ramayana is conventionally dated to the period from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC to the 2<sup>nd</sup> CE. There is no chance of finding an authentic plaque: "Today Dasharatha's son Rama was born here". Such a plaque would not be accepted as proof anyway, for there is no custom of marking birthplaces in that manner. (The Ashokan inscription marking the Buddha's supposed birthplace in Lumbini is some three centuries younger than the event concerned and merely proves that a tradition about him being born there existed, not that this tradition is historically accurate.) So, of any birth that actually took place in Ayodhya in roughly the age of Rama, there is definitely no material record, there simply cannot be one, and it is amateurish to pretend that this absence can prove anything about whether someone was born there.

## RESPECTING "FAITH"

Plenty of protest has been uttered against the Allahabad High Court's ruling that "this was Rama's birthplace". The anti-temple party reacted furiously that "we cannot accept 'faith' in place of hard evidence". [Ghosh 2010:25] "The verdict has annulled respect for history and seeks to replace history with religious faith." [Thapar 2010:20] "A premise of modernity is that (...) 'beliefs' cannot be accepted as 'facts', that there has to be independent and credible evidence on the basis of which alone a 'fact' can be established. Hence the verdict of the Lucknow bench that Rama was born at the very spot which was the sanctum sanctorum of the Babri Masjid, because 'people' believed this to the case, is as mystifying as it is retrograde. (...) to take the 'beliefs' of the 'people', even assuming they are indeed well-established beliefs of a very large number of people, as synonymous with 'facts',

strikes at the very root of rationality that must underlie a modern society.” [Patnaik 2010:34-35] So, an impression has been created that the decision to treat the site as Rama’s birthplace in deference to a widely held belief is unusual and scandalous. But is it? To get a fair picture, let us compare with how the Indian and other governments deal with similar beliefs of other religions. Consider the following examples.

Outside India, we find that militantly anti-Catholic governments of France, the cradle of secularism, have protected the pilgrimage to Lourdes where the girl Bernadette Soubirou claimed to have seen apparitions of the Virgin Mary in 1858. In Israel, the government protects the Holy Sepulchre church, built on the site where supposedly Jesus Christ lay buried before his resurrection. There is no proof for the resurrection; and the site, where a Hellenistic Pagan temple stood until Emperor Constantine ordered it demolished to make way for this church, was chosen on the strength of a “revelation” that Constantine’s mother Helen received in a dream. Israel has never asked the Christians to first offer proof for this belief, nor does it ask Muslims to prove their impossible tradition that Mohammed flew on a winged horse to land on the hill where the Dome on the Rock and the Al-Aqsa mosque are now standing.

In India, the state makes the (mostly Hindu) taxpayers subsidize the *Hajj*, the Muslim pilgrimage to the Kaaba in Mecca, without asking for proof of their claim that it was built by Adam. Also in India, millions of man-hours are lost to the economy because some 15% of the population are given an official holiday to celebrate the Prophet’s birthday, even though there is no proof nor even a scriptural claim that Mohammed was indeed born on that day (though that day of the year is mentioned as the day he died). So, as Dr. Subramaniam Swamy [2010:32], a late convert to Hindu nationalism, has argued: neither should Hindus be required to offer proof for their religious traditions. The legend that the apostle Thomas brought Christianity to Kerala in 52 CE is routinely repeated by politicians, on taxpayer-funded monuments and in governmental

publications. Yet there is neither textual nor archaeological support for this belief, and in a speech on 27 September 2006, even Pope Benedict XVI denied that Saint Thomas came to South India, saying instead that Thomas reached “Western India, from where Christianity reached South India”. [Anathakrishnan 2006] Indeed, the one ancient text on which the legend is based, the apocryphal *Acts of Thomas*, takes the apostle in a slave caravan (after being sold into slavery by his twin-brother Jesus!) to a desert-like country where the names are Persian: this could be Afghanistan, part of “India” broadly conceived, but not lush Kerala. When the people turn against him because of his anti-social acts, including abduction of women and cruel miracles against insufficiently docile children, the king asks him to leave, but he refuses and gets killed right there in punishment of his crimes; which excludes an after-story that still might have taken Thomas to Kerala. So, whereas the story of Rama in Ayodhya at least has a textual tradition in its support, Thomas in Kerala doesn’t even have that. There is even less authentic support for the claim that Thomas was murdered by Brahmins in Chennai on the site of the present-day San Thomé church, a blood libel which again is consecrated by media repetition and in governmental publications. [discussed in Sharan 2010] None of the campaigners against the Ayodhya temple is known to have stood up against these “mere myths”. So, secular governments respect unverified and even untenable beliefs, including some that conflict with the laws of nature. By contrast, the belief that person X was born at site Y, even when unverified, is at least perfectly within the bounds of natural possibility. If Rama’s life and times remain unconfirmed by archaeology, and even if we choose to disregard the textual tradition, respect for the beliefs about him is merely of one piece with the respect paid to beliefs of other religions.

## WHY THIS CONTROVERSY?

Until 1989 there had been no dispute about the site’s history. *All* the written sources that spoke out on the matter, whether Hindu, Muslim or European, were in agreement about the pre-existence of a



Rama temple at the site. In the court case about the disputed site in 1885, neither the Muslim litigants nor the British judge denied it; the latter merely ruled that, regrettable as a temple demolition was, it was too long ago now to bother remedying it. "Rama's birthplace is marked by a mosque, erected by the Moghul emperor Babar in 1528 on the site of an earlier temple", according to the 1989 edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, entry "Ayodhya". Neither was there any document contradicting this scenario by substantiating an alternative scenario. Thus, there is no account of a forest chopped down to make way for the mosque (already unlikely in the centre of an ancient city), no sales contract of real estate to the mosque's builder, nothing of the kind. By contrast, there was testimony after testimony of Hindus bewailing and Muslims boasting of the replacement of the temple with a mosque; and of Hindus under Muslim rule coming as close as possible to the site in order to celebrate Rama's birthday every year in April. This they did in apparent continuation of the practice at the time when the temple stood, and shows how to them not the building but the site itself was sacred.

In the 1980s, there were no spectacular discoveries that called for a revision of the old consensus. On the contrary, whatever new evidence came to light, such as Tieffenthaler's travelogue, only confirmed it. So, there really was no reason to open a debate on Ayodhya's history. And the debate that did take place, was marred by shrillness, slanging-matches, allegations *ad hominem*, rhetorical sleight-of-hand, gross absolutes where nuance was called for, and total politicization. The worst of it was that it missed the point. In a sane society, the history of the site would not have been all that important for a satisfactory decision regarding the future of the disputed site. Today's reality should provide enough guidance. The simple fact is that millions of Hindus with a reverence for Rama, including Sikhs, go on pilgrimage to Ayodhya and in particular to the Rama Janmabhumi site. No Muslim or Christian, no Jew or Zoroastrian, cares for Ayodhya the way these Hindu pilgrims do. In these circumstances, the normal human thing to do is to

leave the site to the people who consider it sacred. The attitude of the anti-temple Muslims and secularists is that of a playground bully: grabbing the toys dear to other kids, not because he has any use for them himself, but simply for the pleasure of acting out his power to inflict this loss and humiliation on others. The solution for this conflict lies in the application of the Golden Rule: do not do unto others what you don't want them to do to you. Do Muslims want non-Muslims to take over the Kaaba? Do they even want to share the Kaaba with non-Muslims? If not, then they should not want to occupy any Hindu sacred site. The right thing to do is so obvious: all those who have no reason to go on pilgrimage to Ayodhya, should give up all claims to the site and leave it unconditionally to those who do. This moral principle, not to demand from others the kind of thing you wouldn't want them to take from you, is so natural that the really worthy object for Ayodhya research should be: what ideological motives and political mechanisms have led to the violation of this principle, not just by jihadi ideologues, but by professors and intellectuals who claim to be the enlightened ("secular") elite in India?

## CONCLUSION

In 1947, the Babri Masjid was an empty building shielded from the public by Government order. Hindu devotees started agitating for unlimited Hindu access and for its replacement with proper Hindu architecture, not at the initiative of but with increasing participation from the VHP, and ultimately with official support from the BJP. At the political level, however, not the Hindu nationalist BJP but the Congress Party has been the main driving force in the gradual acceptance of the Hindu claim to the disputed site. By repeatedly linking policy to the question of the site's history, it favoured a pro-temple outcome.

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