

# **Ayodhya and God Rama**

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## **Abstract**

This paper explores Rama's historical and religious significance within Indian tradition, emphasizing his divinity and his association with Ayodhya as his birthplace. It discusses the transformation of Rama from a legendary figure to a divine deity, highlighting scriptural, epigraphic, and numismatic evidence that substantiates his worship as an incarnation of Vishnu by the second century A.D. Additionally, it delves into the archaeological evidence from Ayodhya that supports the continuous recognition of the site as a sacred locale in Hinduism. It highlights its importance through various periods, particularly noting significant findings from the Gupta period and later inscriptions.

**Keywords:** Rama, Ayodhya, Hinduism, Vishnu Incarnation, Indian Epigraphy, Archaeological Evidence

According to the age-old Indian tradition, Rama flourished in the second aeon (yuga) known as Treta, thousands of years before Christ and considerably prior to Krishna, who is supposed to have lived at the close of the third yuga (Dvapara). These dates have been doubted, perhaps not without reason, by many historians, as divergent traditions prevailed in ancient India in this matter (Shastri, 1969, pp. 7-11; Reference note 1). Despite debates regarding exact dates, the consensus within the Indian tradition is that Krishna followed Rama chronologically, and correspondingly, the Mahabharata episode came later than the Ramayana. This is supported by the occurrence of the Ramayana story, referred to as Ramopakhyanaparvan in the Vanaparvam of the Mahabharata, and the casual manner in which the Mahabharata refers to the Ramayana episodes, leaving no doubt about the priority of the Ramayana to the Mahabharata, both as episodes and texts (Pasalkar, 1962, as cited in *The Cultural Heritage of India*, II, p. 31; Reference note 2). The doubts expressed by a few modern scholars have no real basis to stand upon (Lal, as cited in Sinha, 1989, pp. 1-11; Reference note 3).

The two epics, as they are now available, represent only the final form, and their compilation was a gradual process. According to M. Winternitz, whose opinion is commonly accepted by historians of Indian literature, the original Valmikiya Ramayana, portraying Rama only as a human being and bereft of a major portion of the first (Bala) and the whole of the last (Uttara) kanda, along with a few other portions deifying Rama, were added later. It was composed in the fourth or third century B.C., and with all the later interpolations, including Bala and Uttara kandas, as well as all the later accretions deifying Rama and identifying him with god Vishnu, it had come into existence by the close of the second century A.D. (Engli, 1927, pp. 500-517; Reference note 4) And the Mahabharata, according to the same authority, cannot have received its present form earlier than the fourth century B.C. and later than the fourth century A.D. (Engli, 1927, pp. 465; Reference note 5). These latest dates are highly crucial for our purpose as they show that by the second century A.D. at the latest Rama has already come to be recognized as an incarnation of god Vishnu.

The same is indicated by the rich epigraphic and numismatic data. Leaving aside evidence of a general nature which may be interpreted as referring to Rama as an ideal human being (Shastri, in Nayak et al., n.d.; Reference note 6), we may refer here to an important inscription on a stone-slab from the well-known antiquarian site of Kausambi (modern Kosam, Allahabad district, Uttar Pradesh) which has been discovered recently. It provides the most important evidence on Rama's supreme divinity. The inscription is very fragmentary, and much of its important portion is lost due to the damage to the stone. It purports to record some pious act performed by a grihapati along with his son, named Indraghosha in connection with Bhagavat (God) Rama-Narayana. The adjective bhagavat being in genitive singular, it is apparent that the intention was probably to record the erection of a shrine of the god or installation of his image or some emblem (Shukla, 1990, pp. 207-12; Reference note 7). The inscription was dated, but a major portion is lost so that was missed the year, and only the day (divasa) remains. It is  $10 + 2 = 12$ . The month may have been Karttika as the eleventh day of the bright half of this month and

is/was regarded as very sacred by the Vaishnavas because of their belief that god Vishnu wakes up from his four-month-long slumber that day. Following that day, viz. Karttika sukla dvadasi, is the parana or breaking the fast when the grihapati, whose name is lost, must have performed this pious act. Although the date is lost irretrievably, the paleographic features, the mode of dating and the employment of Prakrit clearly show that the inscription belongs to about the middle of the second century A.D. This record is of inestimable value despite its highly damaged condition for the history of the Rama cult. For it conclusively establishes that by about mid-second century A.D. Rama's identity with god Vishnu-Narayana has become deep-rooted in public mind and his independent cult had not only come into existence but had become quite popular. This is very significant as veterans like R.G. Bhandarkar (Bhandarkar, 1929, Vol. IV ; Reference note 8) and H.C. Raychaudhuri (Materials for the Study of the Early History of Vaishnava Sect, 1936, p. 174; Reference note 9) held the worship of Rama, not to speak of a cult in his honor. Had not become quite popular even as late as the Gupta age. This notion has now to be substantially modified in the light of this and other evidence to be cited presently (Allan, 1936).

Some coins from Mathura prove the existence of a king named Ramadatta of the Mathura region in the second century A.D. at least (Ramesh & Tewari, 1990, p. 1; Reference note 10). Meaning given by Rama or devoted to Rama, it is comparable to names like Vishnudatta and Krishnadatta of Vaishnavite affiliation current even now. Of equally great significance is the name of the Gupta emperor Ramagupta, elder brother of Chandragupta II Vikramaditya, which means 'protected by Rama'. And as the name is normally given by parents, it may be reasonably assumed that at least one of his parents was a devotee of Rama.

Another evidence of perhaps the greatest importance in this context comes from an unexpected source. It is from the Bagh (Dhar district, Madhya Pradesh) copper-plate of Maharaja Bhulunda, dated in the year 47 published recently but whose value from our viewpoint is being highlighted for the first time here (Ramesh & Tewari, 1990, p. VII - VIII). The record registers the grant of five villages for the performance of the rites called bali, charu and sattrra of the demons, the mortals and the serpents, the bhagavata, sleeping in the ocean, who is put to sleep by the music of the bees inhabiting the lotus blooming out his navel, who is endowed with eight arms carrying conch shell, arrow, spear, wheel, the sword called Nandaka, a radiate mace, a lance (in seven hands, the eighth arm supporting his head in the Sesha-sayana form), who had broken the pride of Bali, Naraka, Namuchi, the kesi horse, the Kaliya snake, Dasavadna (Ravana), Kamsa, Chanura, Arishta and Sisupala, who as Varatha (Boar incarnation) retrieved the lost earth, and who is without beginning, middle and end (Reference note 11). This is, in fact, the earliest known datable description of the eight-armed sesha saying (reclining on the primeval snake Sesha or Ananta). What is, however, most interesting from our point of view here is the reference to the demons killed by him. It is interesting to find the 'Ten-headed', viz. Ravana is included in this list along with kamsa, Sisupala etc. It leaves absolutely no doubt that the allusion here is to god Vishnu's incarnations such as Rama, Krishna, Varaha, etc. And most interesting for our present purpose is that the eight-armed reclining Vishnu is credited with all these achievements,

showing that Rama and Krishna were regarded not just as Vishnu's incarnations but were identified with Vishnu. They were verily Vishnu himself. As regards the date of this epigraph, it was issued in the forty-seventh year of an unspecified reckoning which has been identified variously by different scholars. But the identification with the Gupta era of A.D. 319-20 appears more likely (Reference note 12). The inscription, therefore, belongs to about A.D. 366 (Reference note 13). It may thus be concluded that by the third quarter of the fourth century A.D. Rama had been completely identified with Vishnu (Mitashi, 1955, pp. 6, 9, 11).

Further, Bhasa, the well-known Sanskrit dramatist, and Kalidasa take Rama's divinity for granted. Kalidasa is now generally believed to have lived in the Gupta age, though the view placing him in the first century B.C. is also not impossible. And Bhasa is cited with reverence by Kalidasa.

As such, the available evidence (Bakker, 1986) clearly shows that Rama had come to be treated as divine by the beginning of the Christian era at the latest and the process must have begun much earlier (Reference note 14).

Valmiki, it hardly be added, associates not only Rama, son of Dasaratha, but also his predecessors of the Aikshvaku dynasty with Ayodhya which was their capital. And so does the poet-laureate Kalidasa in his famed poem Raghuvamasa. It need hardly be stressed that both as well as the entire Hindu tradition regard Ayodhya as the place of the birth of the hero-turned-god Rama. As per the accepted date of Valmiki, this tradition dates from the fourth century B.C. at the latest (Bakker, op. cit., p.51). It has been a matter of faith with the Hindus just as the birth of Jesus Christ at the site of the Church of Nativity at Bethlehem and the association of Prophet Muhammad with Kaba.

Archaeologically, it is already well-established that Ayodhya was well settled in about 800 B.C. and as NBP and ordinary gray ware sherds dating from an earlier period have been found from the surface (Bakker, op. cit., p.52) as well as in the course of leveling in July 1992, an excavation at the lofty mound adjoining the disputed Babri Masjid site is likely to yield evidence of a considerably earlier settlement.

Although Ayodhya had been a seat of several Indian religions like Jainism, Buddhism and various Brahmanical cults, including Shaivism and Shaktism, it was especially sacred to Vaishnavas, including those of the Rama cult. While the excavations have revealed the existence of a huge structure, possibly of a Hindu temple, at the locality where once there stood the disputed structure by revealing the bases of columns in the eleventh-twelfth centuries A.D. levels, we have also definite epigraphic evidence (Bakker, op. cit., p.52) from the Gahadavala period.

The Chandravati plates of the Gahadavala king Chandradeva, dated V.S. 1150 (A.D. 1092-93), inform us that the king visited Ayodhya and performed various rites, including the worship of

god Vasudeva, i.e., Vishnu (Reference note 16). The Ayodhya Mahatmya of the Skanda-purana (Vrindavana manuscript), dating from about the thirteenth century A.D. refers to an idol called 'Chandrahari' in the Vasudeva temple at the Svargadvara ghat at Ayodhya which was believed to have been installed by Chandra who had come on a pilgrimage to worship Vishnu (Reference note 17). As pointed out by Hans Bakker, who has made a detailed study of Ayodhya from various angles, here we have a veiled allusion to the construction of the temple or the installation of the image therein by Chandradeva (Reference note 18).

Another inscription of Jayachchandradeva, dated A.D. 1184 from Ayodhya which, inter alia, records the construction of a Vaishnava temple, remains unpublished (Reference note 19). As we have seen above, at least from the second century A.D., Rama had come to be identified with god Vishnu. Hence we are inclined to believe that the god worshiped by the Gahadavala kings must have been none other than Rama himself, at least in so far as Ayodhya is concerned.

And as if this were not enough, a large rectangular stone-slab (measuring about 5\*2 ft.) bearing a twenty-line inscription was recovered on December 6, 1992, from the walls of the so-called Babri Masjid which finally established this fact. The inscription is composed in high-frown Sanskrit verse, except for a very small portion in prose, and is engraved in the chaste and classical Nagari script of the eleventh-twelfth century A.D. It has yet to be fully deciphered, but the portions which have been fully deciphered and read are of great historical significance and value for our purpose here. It was evidently put up on the wall of the temple (Agrawal, 1992), the construction of which is recorded in the text inscribed on it. Line 15 of this inscription, for example clearly tells us that a beautiful temple of Vishnu-Hari, built with heaps of stone (sila-samadhi-graham), and beautified with a golden spire (hiranya-kamsa-sri sundaram) unparalleled by any other temple built by earlier kings (purvvair-apy-akritam kritam nripatibhar) was constructed. This wonderful temple (aty-adbhutam) was built in the temple-city (vibudh-alayani) of Ayodhya situated in the Saketamandala (district-line 17) showing that Ayodhya and Saketa were closely connected, Saketa being the district of which Ayodhya was a part. Line 19 describes god Vishnu as destroying king Bali (apparently in the Vamana manifestation) and the ten-headed personage (Dasanana, i.e. Ravana).

Line 20 contains an illusion to the serious threat from the west (paschatya-bhiti), apparently posed by Sultan Ibrahim and his son Mahmud of Ghazni, and its destruction by the king.

The inscription was composed by the poet Ayushyachandra, son of Alhana. Perhaps he was also the king and as royal port he is said to have excelled even Sahasanka and Sudraka (line 16) and is credited with the excavation of tanks and laying wells as well as stepped wells (line 17). In lines 7 and 11 we get a reference to a powerful king named Sallakshana, who in view of paleographic consideration and in keeping with the extant information of the history of this period, was perhaps the Chandella King Sallakshanavarman who ruled at the end of the eleventh and the beginning of the twelfth century A.D. It is also not impossible that there was another

king of this name belonging to some other dynasty (Reference note 20). But the inscription certainly proves the building of a magnificent temple of Hari-Vishnu, the killer of Ravana, i.e., Rama (Reference note 21).

In the debris of the disputed structure were also found some intact and broken stone images. The former included a very important 3 ft figure of standing Rama in the pose called Kodanda-Rama iconographically. This image, dating from late 19th century A.D., fashioned of Jaipur marble and painted black and yellow, depicts Rama as holding bow-and-arrow by posture and clearly establishes the fact that Rama worship continued at this place even after the demolition of the original Hindu temple.

In the so-called Babri Masjid itself, there has been very important evidence (T.P. Verma, A.K. Singh) to indicate that prior to its construction, there stood a Hindu temple, apparently the one referred to in the epigraph just mentioned, and that material of the demolished temple had been used in the disputed structure. We have noticed the letter 'si', which, paleo graphically speaking, belongs to the Nagari alphabet of the eleventh-twelfth century A.D. (Reference note 22) inscribed on a black stone pillar then found fixed at the main gate located below the central dome. During the leveling work for the building of the Rama temple in June 1992, a huge pit was noticed, which we observed in October 1992, also yielding a lot of evidence for the prior existence of the temple, which was demolished to make room for the mosque in the sixteenth century A.D., apparently by Babar's general Mir Baqil at his master's orders. This consisted of a number of architectural members and sculpture fragments found at a depth of some 10 to 12 ft from the ground level. These included, inter alia, several half malakas, evidently (Bakker, op. cit.) of side spires, stencil-decoration, a pillar capital, a cornice, a floral frieze, a door-jamb, relief sculptures of Vishnu's incarnations, terracotta figures, etc. (Reference note 23) Then, there are various recessions of the Ayodhya Mahatmya of the Skanda Purana, the oldest of which as noted earlier, goes back to about the thirteenth century A.D. These should suffice to show that Ayodhya was quite an important holy center of the Hindus, especially the Vaishnavas, long before the disputed Babri Masjid was erected over the remains of a Vaishnava Hindu shrine (Malaiya, n.d.).

And even after Babar built a mosque over the remains of a Hindu temple, the Hindus not only could not and did not forget this humiliation but continued to lay claims to it with their unflinching zeal to regain it, as indicated by the rich Muslim and European references (Reference note 24).

**Note:** This paper was originally published in Puratattva Journal, Bulletin of the Indian Archaeological Society, number 23, 1992-93, minus an abstract and keywords and citation-reference formatting.

## References & Author Notes

1. Shastri, A. M. (1969). India as seen in Brihat Samhita of Varahmihira. Delhi: Publisher. (pp. 7-11).
2. It has been shown by several scholars that the Kamopakhyana of the Mahabharata as well as other allusions (there are as many as righty-two parallelisms) to the Ramayana episodes contained in it at different places are drawn from the Valmikiya Ramayana. Vide V.S. Sukthankar in Kane Commemoration Volume, pp. 482-87, quoted by A.D. Pasalkar in his chapter on “The Ramayana: Its History and Characters” in The Cultural Heritage of India. II, Calcutta, 1962, p.31. The manner they are cited would show that they had already become proverbial by the time of the composition of the Mahabharata.
3. It is true, of course, that B.B. Lal in his excavations at Ayodhya could not find any evidence of its existence prior to 800 B.C. See his “keynote Address” in Sinha B.P. (ed) Srirama in Art, Archaeology and Literature, Patna, 1989, pp. 1-11. The Deptt. Of Ancient Indian History, Culture and Archaeology, Banaras Hindu University, also in its limited excavations at Ayodhya had also come across Northern Polished Ware in the lowest layers at Ayodhya. B.P. Sinha concedes the archaeological position and points out certain contradictions between the literary and archaeological evidence and rightly pleads for more digging at Ayodhya and other Ramayana sites. See *ibid.*, pp. 12ff. As we shall see below, there is scope for further work which should take back the antiquity of Ayodhya much earlier. At least by a few centuries, though that is not of any great value in the present context since the cut-off date is A.D. 1528 when the disputed mosque was built.
4. Engli, "History of Indian Literature" (1927). Translated by Ms. S. Ketkar. Calcutta: Publisher Name. (pp. 500-517).
5. *Ibid.*, p. 465.
6. Shastri, A. M. Rama: His Divinity in Literature, Numismatics and Epigraphy. In B. U. Nayak et al. (Eds.), *New Trends in Indian Art and Archaeology*.
7. Shukla, B.C. “The Earliest Inscription of Rmama Worship”, in Choudhury R.D. and Shri Bhagwan Singh, (Eds) *Studies in Indian History and Culture (Kanklal Barua Commemoration Volume)*, Ramanand Vidya Bhavan, Delhi, 1990, pp. 207-12. The text of the inscription runs as under:
  - a. Divase 102 gahapati...
  - b. saha darakena Iddaghosena...
  - c. bhagavato Rama Narayana...

We don't agree with B.C. Shukla on certain points relating to interpretation and here we have given our own interpretation.

8. Bhandarkar, R. G. (1929). *Collected Works of Sir R. G. Bhandarkar (Vol. IV)*. Pune.
9. *Materials for the Study of the Early History of Vaishnava Sect.*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Calcutta, 1936, p.174.

10. Allan, J. (1936). *Catalog of Indian Coins in the British Museum: Coins of Ancient India*. London.
11. Ramesh K.V. and Tewari S.P., *A Copper-plate Hoard of the Gupta Period from Bagh, Madhya Pradesh, New Delhi-Mysore, 1990*, p. 1, text-lines, 1-5:

Bhagavatah

sur-asura-nar-oraga-guroh

amara-vara-ripu-ridhira-srita-sara-prasarasy-aikarnnava-vipula-vimla-paryyarika-t

ala-sayinab

nabhi-sambhav-sravinda-shatpad-opagiyamana-nidrasya

sankha-bana-sakti-chakra-nandaka-jvalangad-agra-sula-bhasvar-ashta-bahu-salina

h

Bali-Naraka-Namuchi-vara-turaga-bhujaga-Dasavadeana-Kanis-Chanuur-Arishta-

Sisupala-darppa-mathanasya

suta-gan-slankarishnos-trailokya

prabhavishnor-asura-gana-jishnor-Vvishnoh.

12. *Ibid.*, Introduction, pp. Vii-viii.
13. However, according to Mitashi, the records of the Maharaja Valkha are to be dated in the Kalachuri-Chedi era commencing A.D. 249. 50 his inscriptions of the Kalachuri-Chedi Era, CII, IV, Ootacamund, 1955, pp. 6, 9, 11. If this view were to be accepted, the record would date from A.D. 297-98.
14. Some scholars are inclined to date Bhasa as early fifth-fourth century B.C. See A.D. Pusalkar, *Bhasa – A Study*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed, Delhi, 1968, pp. 63ff. For other evidence of an early belief in the divinity of Rama, see our paper “Rama: His Divinity: in Literature, Numismatics and Epigraphy”, in Nayak B.U. et al. (ed). *New Trends in Indian Art and Archaeology*, S.R Rao 70<sup>th</sup> Year Festschrift.
15. Bakker, H. (1986). *Ayodhya*. Groningen: Egbert Forsten. Chapter II.
16. *El*, XIV, pp. 193ff.: also Hans Bakker, *op. cit.*, p.51.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 52.
18. *Ibid.*, This plate is now in the possession of the State Museum, Lucknow.
19. This was observed for the first time by a team of renowned archaeologists during its visits to Ayodhya in October 1992. The credit of inviting attention to this important evidence is due to Shri R.C. Agrawal, formerly Director, Archaeology and Museums, Rajasthan. The letter might stand for the auspicious word siddham or might be a mason’s mark. The letter also occurs on a black stone pillar still standing in a small triangular park located near the Military Hospital, in the Cantt. area of the township of Faizabad. It was apparently shifted here from Rama Janmabhumi area in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.
20. The credit of deciphering and interpreting this inscription goes to Dr. T.P. Verma, Dr. A.K. Singh and myself.
21. Hans Bakker, *op. Cit.*



22. The inscription may substantially contribute to our knowledge of the dynastic history of early medieval India.
23. The information is based on some extracts of the record made available to us by Dr. Sudha Malaiya of Bhopal. There may be some minor changes when the record is fully deciphered, but the fact of the construction of a magnificent Vaishnava temple during the eleventh-twelfth century is indisputably established.
24. We are thankful to our colleague Dr. Chandrashekhar Gupta for collecting some of the data on this issue and providing them to me.