

Ayodhya in eyes of an Architect

Satyarth Pandita

"Ayodhya: A Walk Through the Living Heritage" is a recent publication by the architect Vipul B. Varshney in which she weaves together the elements of magic, mysticism, mythology, architectural marvels, and the historical and geographical contexts surrounding Ayodhya. Varshney delves into the historical background of Ayodhya, also known as the Adipur of Vishnu. The book meticulously unveils the layers of Ayodhya's rich tapestry, offering readers a comprehensive understanding of its cultural heritage. Drawing from various religious texts, the author includes a narration from Sakand Puran where the revered Rishi Agastya responds to the inquiry of many sages about Ayodhya's significance, in the following manner:

"Ayodhya is the holiest of the cities that is inaccessible to people with bad deeds. Here lives the Hari himself in his Murti form. Rivaling the Amaravati of Indra, this divine Ayodhya is on the banks of the Sarayu River. The letter 'Aa' is Brahma, 'Ya' is Vishnu and 'Dha' is Rudra - together, all three of them live in the name of Ayodhya. Any kind of sin, including the Brahmin Hatya, cannot reach this city. Hence, the learned ones call it Ayodhya - the one that cannot be won over."

This sets the tone for the author to explore the diverse names associated with Ayodhya, such as Sukosala, the unconquerable city of Gods, Saket and Viniya/Vinita, establishing it as the first city of Vishnu and the first among Saptapuri - the seven Mokshadayini or salvation giving cities in India.

The book unfolds through nine chapters, beginning with a historical overview of Ayodhya's religious significance, tracing back to the first millennium AD. It offers a historical narrative centred around the Gahadavala dynasty, highlighting key rulers such as Govindachandra, Vijayachandra, and Jayachandra and how Ayodhya flourished as a centre of Vaishnavism, with several Vishnu temples built, and how it eventually became a significant pilgrimage site.

The narrative expands to encompass the conflict in Bahraich involving Ghazi Miyan, a Muslim conqueror, and the subsequent victory of Suhalddev's army in 1033 CE. The construction of Vishnu temples during the Gahadavala era and inscriptions like the Vishnu-Hari inscription provide insights into the city's historical and cultural landscape.

The book addresses legal disputes, including the Ram-Janambhoomi case, drawing on evidence from the ASI (Archaeological Survey of India) and structures converted into mosques. The Vishnu-Hari inscription, dating around 1140, specifically is presented as a crucial piece of evidence of a temple to Vishnu, dispelling doubts about the pre-existing temple at the mosque site.

The author meticulously traces the chronological history of Ayodhya, presenting evidence of possibly two temples predating the 13th century, reinforcing the existence of an earlier temple prior to Babar's destruction. Varshney also presents evidence from various texts depicting the mass destruction of Hindu temples by the Muslim invaders and Islamic rulers, citing the discovery of Kushana period terracotta images of gods and goddesses at the Janambhoomi site.

The section of the book titled 'Connections with Faraway Lands' sheds light on Ayodhya's global impact, exploring the relationship with countries like Korea, Indonesia and Thailand. The book unveils the profound link between Ayutthaya, founded in 1350 by King Ramathibodi, and the enduring influence of Lord Rama in Thai history. Despite Ayutthaya's fall to Burmese forces in 1767, the Chakkri dynasty restored it, naming rulers after Rama. Hindu influences persist in Thai culture, seen in ceremonies, cremation, and worship of the Hindu Trinity. The Thai Ramayana, amakien, remains central to Thai traditions. The book explores historical ties, including the naming of Laos and Lopburi after Lord Rama's sons, Lava and Kusha.

The grandeur of Ayodhya is vividly described through various texts such as the original version of Valmiki Ramayana. The vivid description of the ancient Ayodhya

brings forth the imagery, allowing readers to envision the city's magnificence. In the author's own words, "Valmiki's description of Ayodhya and Ram Rajya is so vivid that one feels like a Citizen of Ancient Ayodhya."

Varshney's exploration extends beyond the physical and historical dimensions of Ayodhya. The book delves into the profound connection between the animate and inanimate elements, emphasizing their sacredness and inner energy, identified with atoms in modern physics. It explores the concept of "param tatva" or all-pervading matter, and its connection to the "param atma" or all-pervading consciousness of the cosmos.

Focusing on Ayodhya's town planning, the text reveals that, like Dholavira, Ayodhya's design was based on specific proportions, exemplified by a 4:1 ratio. Drawing from Valmiki's descriptions in the Bala Kanda, the author interprets Ayodhya's palaces as perfectly constructed, well-planned structures inhabited by noble individuals. The comparison to a "vimaana," an aerial car or space station, underscores the meticulous beauty of Ayodhya's architecture.

The connection between Ayodhya and vimaana is not arbitrary, as the author points out Valmiki's earlier description of the palaces as akin to vimaana. The book explores the significance of a "siddha" - a master achieving physical and spiritual perfection - and their association with vimaana, tying it to the transformative practices of sadhans. Sage Valmiki's poetic descriptions, especially in the context of Ayodhya's seven-storey gemstone-studded homes, contribute to a rich narrative that unravels the ancient wisdom embedded in Hindu scriptures.

In a separate section, the author addresses some frequently asked questions about Rama's birth, rule duration and the reality of the Pushpak Vimana. There are also descriptions of Holy Places of Lord Ram's Exile Path, such as Shri Ram temple, which is situated on the river Tamara banks and is in the Tardi village, The Surya Kund, Gupta Ghat or GoPrastar Ghat.

Furthermore, the book explores various sites and temples in Ayodhya, taking readers on a virtual tour, visiting Sita ki Rasoi, Treta Ke Thakur Temple, Kanak Bhawan, Dashrath Samadhi, Dashrath Bhawan, Janaki Mahal, Nageshwarnatha Temple, The Chandrahari Temple, Mahaparvat, Hanuman Garhi, Sugriva Quila, Hanumangarhi Naka, Hanumangarhi Saadatganj, Hanumangarhi Fatehganj, Panchmukhi Mahadev Mandir, Prithviteshwar Temple Mahadevan Temple, Badi Devkall Temple, Sheetla Temple, and many more.

The author pays special attention to the legends associated with River Sarayu and its significance in Lord Shree Rama's life, connecting it to events like Putrakameshti Yagya and the sage Vishwamitra's teaching.

In a concise manner, the author details the 'Ghats of Divinity' encompassing Basudeo Ghat and Rama Ghat, Svaragadvara Ghat and Naya Ghat, Sahastradhara or Lakshmanikila Ghat, Papamochana Ghat, Jhunki Ghat, Rinamochana Ghat, Chakratirtha Ghat and others. This section further enhances the reader's understanding of Ayodhya's sacred geography and the spiritual significance attributed to its ghats.

Vipul B. Varshney's "Ayodhya: A Walk Through the Living Heritage" is an indispensable contribution to the exploration of India's cultural and spiritual heritage. It stands out not only as an intellectually enriching exploration but also as a visual feast. The inclusion of captivating pictures adds a vibrant dimension to the narrative, allowing readers to connect with Ayodhya's history and architecture visually. The illustrations, complementing the text, contribute to a more immersive reading experience.

The book goes beyond being merely a historical or mythological account; it is a holistic journey through the heart of Ayodhya, unravelling its layers of precision and depth. As a seamless blend of scholarly insight, engaging storytelling, and visual allure, Varshney's book is a powerful and engaging read, catering to both the academic and general reader. The thorough research presented in an engaging storytelling format, makes the content accessible to a wide audience.

