

Tracing the Buddhist and Jain Antiquity of Ayodhya

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Abstract

This paper re-examines the early presence of Buddhism and Jainism in Ayodhya, traditionally viewed through a predominantly Brahmanical lens, and reconstructs its multi-religious past from the 7th century BCE to the early medieval period. The study aims to identify and interpret archaeological, textual, and art-historical evidence attesting to Ayodhya's role as a vibrant centre of both traditions. Drawing upon excavation reports by Cunningham, B. B. Lal, and B. R. Mani, canonical Pali and Jain texts, medieval tirtha accounts, and museum collections, it adopts an interdisciplinary methodology that integrates stratigraphic, iconographic, and literary analysis. The paper argues that the Buddhist and Jain antiquity of Ayodhya has been historically underrepresented and calls for renewed scholarly attention to its early sacred landscape.

Keywords: Ayodhya, Saketa, Buddhism, Jainism, Tirthankara, Antiquity

Introduction

Ayodhya, located on the banks of the Saryu River in present-day Uttar Pradesh, is often revered as the mytho-historical birthplace of Lord Rama. However, its deeper antiquity reflects a confluence of multiple religious traditions, most notably Buddhism and Jainism. Known as *Saketa* in Buddhist sources and *Vinita* in Jain texts, Ayodhya appears prominently in the early religious geography of the Ganga Valley. Its cultural landscape, shaped by non-Brahmanical traditions, has been largely obscured in popular discourse. This paper re-examines the archaeological and textual footprint of Buddhism and Jainism in Ayodhya to argue for its significance as a shared religious hub, with surviving evidence ranging from the 7th century BCE to the early medieval period (Lal, 1973; Manjhi & Mani, 2003).

Literature Review and Research Framework

The earliest mentions of Ayodhya appear in the *Atharvaveda* (x.2.31), where it is described as “built by the gods” and akin to paradise (Joshi, 1960). The *Aitareya Brahmana* and *Panini’s Ashtadhyayi* further attest to the city’s early Vedic recognition (Law, 1954). Jain texts such as *Avasyaka Churni* and *Kalpa Sutra* refer to Ayodhya as *Vinita*, the birthplace of five *tirthankaras* (Shah, 1987). Buddhist Pali sources like the *Samyutta Nikaya*, *Saketa Sutta*, and *Mahavamsa* highlight the Buddha’s extended residence in Saketa, while the Chinese pilgrims Fa Hian and Hiuen-Tsang record a thriving Buddhist community (Cunningham, 2000).

Despite this richness, scholarly focus has remained limited. This paper aims to trace the Buddhist and Jain presence in Ayodhya, identify and interpret the material remains supporting this antiquity, and examine the socio-political causes of decline. Methodologically, it integrates archaeological data, travel narratives, and canonical literature with a stratigraphic and iconographic lens.

Archaeological Context and Urban Evolution

Excavations by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) and scholars like B. B. Lal and B. R. Mani have confirmed that Ayodhya's urban history extends to the early Iron Age. The cultural sequence uncovered by Lal (1973) and later by Manjhi and Mani (2003) begins with Northern Black Polished Ware (NBPW) in the 7th century BCE, continuing through the Sunga, Kushana, and Gupta phases. Finds include wattle-and-daub houses, brick walls, terracotta ring wells, and Rouletted Ware sherds indicating long-distance trade with the Tamralipti and Ganga maritime networks (Thapar, 1980).

Three mounds surveyed by Cunningham, Mani Parvat, Kuber Parvat, and Sugriv Parvat were identified as key Buddhist sites by him. Mani Parvat, 65 feet high, contained ancient bricks and a curved *kankar*-block wall; it was identified with the Ashokan stupa built to commemorate Buddha's teachings. Kuber Parvat, 28 feet tall, was linked to a stupa housing relics of Buddha's hair and nails. Sugriv Parvat showed the layout of a cloistered monastery with a central well, fitting Hiuen-Tsang's description of the Sammatiya vihara (Cunningham, 2000).

Further excavations at Ram Janmabhoomi, Hanuman Garhi, and Nandigram highlighted structural phases continuing into the Gupta and early medieval periods (Manjhi & Mani, 2003; Mitra, 1983). A grey terracotta Jain *kevalin*, possibly the earliest found in India, was discovered in the Hanuman Garhi area and dated to the 4th century BCE (Thapar, 1980).

Buddhist Presence in Early and Medieval Ayodhya

According to Ceylonese chronicles, the Buddha spent 16 years in the *Pubharama* monastery in Saketapura. Located near the bend of the Saryu, this monastery was constructed by local residents (Datta, 1988). Texts such as the *Saketa Sutta* and *Pubbarama Sutta* suggest that this site served as a key teaching centre. Anjanavana, another forest monastery, is also referenced as a place where the Buddha delivered discourses.

Hiuen-Tsang's 7th century CE account mentions 20 monasteries with 3,000 monks adhering to the Sammatiya school. His records describe platforms dedicated to former Buddhas, a stupa housing Buddha's hair and nails, and tanks that reflected these structures. The layout aligns precisely with the monastic ruins of Sugriv Parvat, identified by Cunningham (2000). The tombs of Seth and Job near Mani Parvat, according to Cunningham, may represent later constructions over earlier Buddhist platforms once visited by Hiuen-Tsang.

The Rabatak inscription of Kanishka lists Saketa among the four principal cities under Kushana rule (Prasad, 2013). This is corroborated by the legacy of Asvaghosha, a Brahmin from Saketa who converted to Buddhism and composed *Buddhacharita* and *Saundarananda*. Similarly, Vasubandhu, the Mahayana scholar, spent the last phase of his life in Ayodhya and died there at the age of 80 (Datta, 1988).

Within the Nageshwarnath temple complex lies a reused pillar base resembling Ashokan lotiform architecture. Chakrabarti (2001) suggests this could be the remains of a lost Ashokan pillar, especially since the temple's rear faces a high mound likely containing more structural remains. Sculptural evidence from Karmadanda village and Kaushal Museum, Ayodhya, further illustrates religious syncretism sculptures of Kuber-Panchika with Buddhist and Brahmanical elements from the Kushan period (Kumar, 2019).

Coins inscribed with names like Visakha-datta and Dhana-deva, both associated with the Saketa lineages, have been found in Ayodhya (Sircar, 1971). Visakha, a prominent female patron of the Buddha, is believed to have built the Purvvarama monastery in Saketa, similar to the one she constructed in Sravasti. It is suggested that the city may have been named *Visakha* in her honour, reinforcing Buddhist foundations in its early urban identity (Cunningham, 2000).

Jain Sacred Geography and Temple Heritage

Jain tradition records Ayodhya (Vinita) as the birthplace of five *tirthankaras* from the Ikshvaku dynasty, namely Rishabhanatha, Ajitanatha, Abhinandanana, and

Sumatinatha, and Anantanatha (Shah, 1987). These birthplaces, referred to as *janmasthals*, have been marked with temples since the 18th century CE.

A significant archaeological find is a grey terracotta figurine from the 1976-77 excavations by B. B. Lal. Identified as a Jain kevalin, it features the *kayotsarga* posture, bald head, and elongated earlobes traits consistent with Jain iconography and is dated to the 4th century BCE (Thapar, 1980).

Jinaprabha Suri, a Jain monk at the court of Muhammad bin Tughlaq, visited Ayodhya in 1328 CE. His *Vividha Tirtha Kalpa* refers to the shrine of Dharmanatha at Ranavahapura, the moksha-tirtha of Naminatha, and a shrine to Munisuvrata at Ayodhya (Shah, 1987). These accounts signal continued pilgrimage importance during the Sultanate period.

In the 18th century, Kesari Singh, treasurer to Nawab Shuja-ud-Daulah, constructed five Digambara temples on sites believed to be the birthplaces of these five *tirthankaras*. These temples are mainly structurally modern but religiously significant. A sixth Shwetambara temple to Ajitanatha was added in 1825 CE (Beveridge, 1927).

About twelve major Jain temples remain active today, including shrines to Parshvanatha and Mahavira. Notably, the site known as *Shah Juran ka Tila* houses Islamic tombs built over what was once a temple to Adinatha, reportedly destroyed by Makhdam Shah Jaran Ghorid during the Ghorid conquest (Joshi, 1960). Iconographic material sculptures of Ambika and the *tirthankaras* are preserved in the Municipal and Kaushal Museums of Ayodhya (Kumar, 2019).

Discussion

Ayodhya's current religious demography obscures its pluralistic past. As per the latest 2011 Census, Buddhists and Jains comprise only 0.12% and 0.16% of its population, respectively (Census India, 2011). Yet, its stratigraphy, monuments, and memory reveal that it was once a sacred urban centre shaped by monastic, mercantile, and philosophical exchanges across these traditions.

The archaeological sequence from the NBPW phase, combined with travel accounts, confirms that Buddhism and Jainism were not marginal but central to Ayodhya's cultural identity. The gradual assimilation of Buddhist practices into Brahmanism during the Gupta era (Collins, 2000), followed by Huna invasions (debated in the case of Ayodhya) (Nakamura, 1980) and Islamic transformation, led to the decline of these traditions.

However, unlike Buddhism, which left mostly buried traces, Jainism survived through ritual continuity and temple patronage. The presence of living temples and museum-preserved images reflects this endurance.

Conclusion

Ayodhya was not merely a Brahmanical city but a confluence of religious traditions rooted in the early historic period. Archaeological and textual evidence demonstrates its importance as a Buddhist and Jain centre from about the 7th century BCE onwards. This layered religious identity is crucial for a holistic understanding of the city's heritage.

Rather than framing it solely Ramayana-centred, Ayodhya should be recognised for its broader antiquity. Preservation efforts and further archaeological inquiry are essential to understand and honour the city's full historical landscape.

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