Uttar Pradesh

Ayodhya

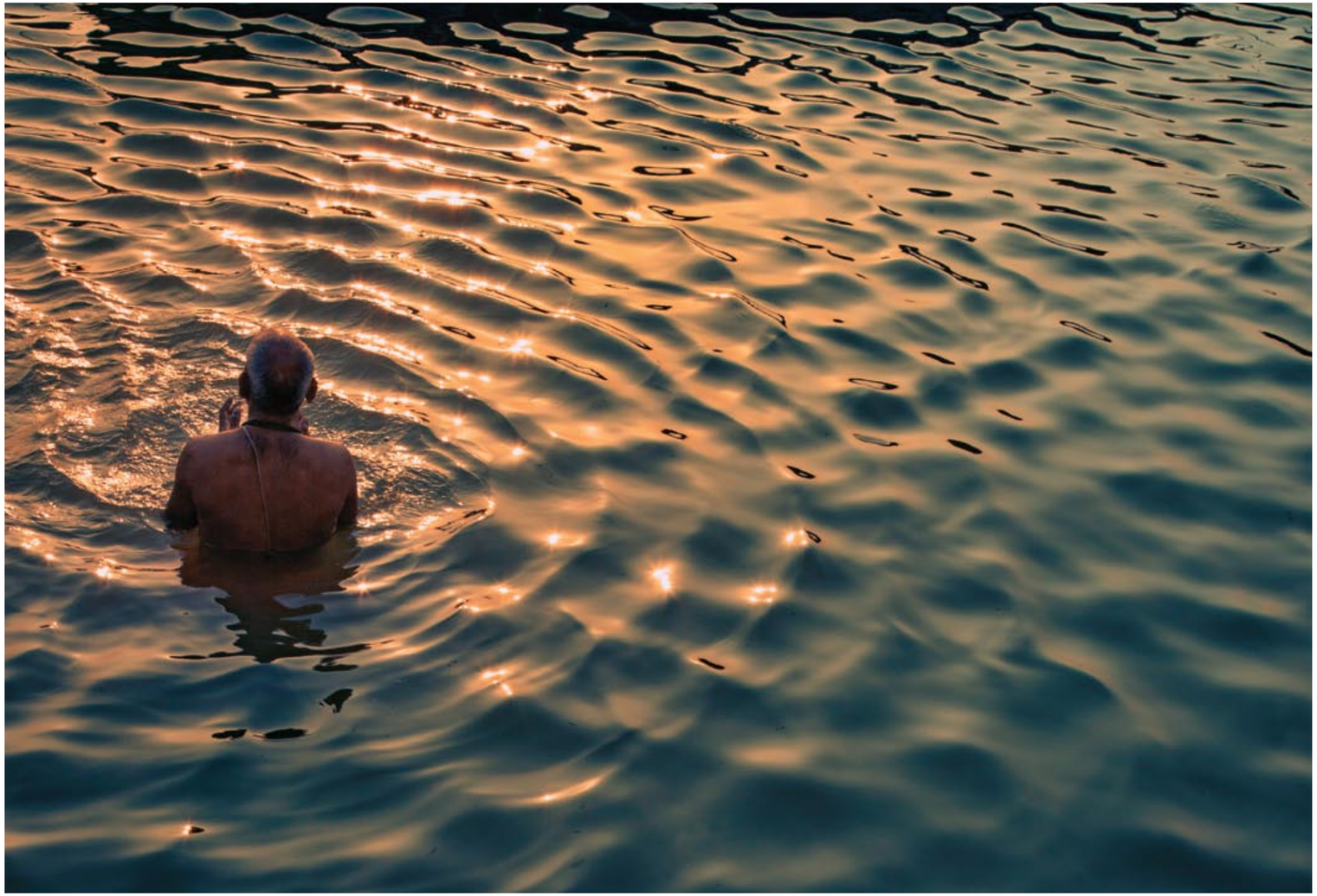
THE LAND OF SHREE RAM

Ayodhya

THE LAND OF SHREE RAM

PRESENTED BY

Uttar Pradesh
UP nahi dekha to India nahi dekha



Outlook traveller GETAWAYS

Editorial
EDITOR Amit Dixit
SENIOR CONSULTING EDITOR Ranee Sahaney
ASSOCIATE EDITOR Prannay Pathak
SENIOR SUB-EDITOR Karan Kaushik
CMS EXECUTIVE Benny Joshua

Research
RESEARCHERS Sharon George, Lima Parte

Design
CREATIVE DIRECTOR Deepak Suri
ASSISTANT ART DIRECTOR Kapil Taragi
SENIOR GRAPHIC DESIGNER Rajesh KG

Photography
SENIOR PHOTO RESEARCHER Raman Pruthi

Business Office
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER Indranil Roy

Advertisements
VICE PRESIDENT Sameer Saxena

Circulation
NATIONAL HEAD Gagan Kohli

Production
GENERAL MANAGER Shashank Dixit
MANAGER Sudha Sharma
ASSOCIATE MANAGER Gaurav Shrivas
DEPUTY MANAGER Ganesh Sah

Printed and published by INDRANIL ROY on behalf of Outlook Publishing (India) Private Limited from AB-10, Safdarjung Enclave, New Delhi-110029
Printed at Avantika Printers Pvt Ltd, New Delhi 110020

First Edition 2021

Copyright © Outlook Publishing (India) Private Limited, New Delhi. All Rights Reserved

---

DISCLAIMER
No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or means electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without prior written permission of Outlook Publishing (India) Private Limited. Brief text quotations with use of photographs are exempted for book review purposes only.

As every effort is made to provide accurate and up-to-date information in this publication as far as possible, we would appreciate if readers would call our attention to any errors that may occur. Some details, however, such as telephone and fax numbers or email ids, room tariffs and addresses and other travel related information are liable to change. The publishers cannot accept responsibility for any consequences arising from the use of information provided in this book. However, we would be happy to receive suggestions and corrections for inclusion in the next edition. Please write to: The Editor, Outlook Traveller Getaways, AB-10, Safdarjung Enclave, New Delhi-110029; Email: letters@outlooktraveller.com

For updates, news and new destinations, log on to our website www.outlooktraveller.com

CONTENTS

- ON A SPIRITUAL SOJOURN 8
  The Ayodhya of Shree Ram
- AYODHYA 24
  Steeped in History and Mythology
- THE RAMCHARITMANAS 30
  A Beacon of Hope for Humanity
- THE SARYU RIVER 32
  Divine Waters Reveal Many a Tale
- AYODHYA SHODH SANSTHAN (RESEARCH INSTITUTE) 41
  A Treasure Trove of Ayodhya's Cultural and Traditional Heritage
- THE MUSICAL TRADITION OF AYODHYA 42
- THE LORD KNOWS NO BORDERS 46
  Ayodhya's Global Influence
- FOR WHOM THE BELLS TOLL 48
  The Many Facets of Shree Ram
- THE LEGEND OF MATA SITA 50
- AYODHYA 52
  Landmarks of Divinity
- WALKS AND PARIKRAMAS 92
  Circumambulations of Faith
- CUISINE OF AYODHYA 100
- FAIRS AND FESTIVALS 102

Ayodhya Dham

LEGEND

- Main Places
- Other Places
- Railway Station
- National Highway
- Main Road
- Other Road
- NH Number
- Train Route
- Hotel
- Restaurant
- Temple
- Gurudwara
- Masjid/ Dargah

Saryu
Naya Ghats
Saryu Ghat
Treta-ke-Thakur
Ram ki Pairi
Nageshwarnath Temple
Kale Ramji ka Mandir
Gola Ghat
Gore Ram Mandir
RAM KATHA PARK
Gau Ghat
Ram Katha Museum
Jhunki Ghat
Janki Mahal
Hotel Ramprastha
Taste Kitchen Restaurant
Ramghat Halt
Tulsi Udyan
Shri Janki Mahal Trust
Kandharpur
Rajghat Park
Chhoti Devkali Temple
Sri Kathiya Mandir
Vibhishana Kund
Tulsi Nagar
Valmiki Ramayan Bhawan
Swamy Narayan Mandir Bhakt Niwas
Jain Shwetambar Temple
Hazrat Nuh
Sri Ram Vallbha Kunj
Janki Ghat
Sheesh Mahal
Gurdwara Nazarbaghji
Chandra Marwadi Bhojanalaya
Baikunth Dham
Kanak Bhawan
Raja Mandir
AYODHYA DHAM
Brahmakundji
Sita Ki Rasoi
Dashratha Mahal
Hotel Rama Residency
Hotel Surya Palace
Shri Ram Janam Bhumi Nyas
Ram Janmabhumi Temple
Hanuman Garhi
Tulsi Smarak Bhawan
Bakunth Dham
Shri Ram Hotel
Kosi Parikrama Road
Faizabad-Ayodhya Road
Birla Dharamshala
Hanumaan Kund
Sai Nagar
Shri Balaji Dharamshala
Ram Nagar
Vashishtha Kund
Saket
Svarnakhani Kund
Bhagwandas Mandir
Dhanayaksha Kund
Brahaspati Kund
Ayodhya Junction
Maharashtra Dharamshala
Rukmini Kund
Rano Pali
Kaniganj
Garahiya
Moti Mahal
Kosi Parikrama Road
Balram Das Temple
Maharishi Mahesh Yogi Ashram
Angoori Bagh
Gudri Bazar
Urvashi Kund
Agni Kund
Param Sweets
Sahabganj
Vagir Ganj
Babdi Devi
Faizabad-Ayodhya Road
Mani Parvat
Vidya Kund
Sita Kund
Ghanta Ghar Chowk
Balda
Sumitra Kund
Ganesh Kund
AYODHYA (Faizabad)
Gulab Bari Garden
City Station Road
Kaushalya Kund
Fatehganj
Abha Hotel
Kohinoor Palace
Faizabad Junction
Beniganj
Panchkosi Orbiting Path
Kaikeyi Kund
Route Planner not to scale

On a Spiritual Sojourn

THE AYODHYA OF SHREE RAM

BY KARAN KAUSHIK

Since time immemorial, Ayodhya has been blessed with a syncretic culture. Its canvas of faith is much bigger than it seems. And yet, the world knows it as the Ayodhya of Shree Ram, the place where pilgrims flock to seek solace and meet their god, the lush forested land where Manu was sent by Vishnu to establish the birthplace of mankind, the city of temples big and small, the sacred place which gave India its biggest and most celebrated cultural festival of Deepawali.

Settled on the banks of the river Saryu, the ancient city of Ayodhya is the birthplace of Shree Ram, the seventh incarnation of Vishnu. A tranquil escape from everyday life, Ayodhya is revered as one of the seven Mokshdayini Saptpuris or the seven noble tirthas for Hindus. The legendary city beckons spiritual seekers with its picturesque ghats, stunning temples, and beautyful aartis. The Atharva Veda describes it as the unconquerable city of gods and compares its prosperity with that of heaven.

Ayodhya's plurality could be observed in the fact that not only does it find mentions in great Hindu scriptures including the Ramayana and the Ramacharitmanas, but also holds great importance in Jain and Buddhist scriptures. Believed to be the birthplace of five of the 24 Jain tirthankaras, Ayodhya is called Ikshvakubhumi in Jain writings.

Ayodhya's name is etched in the annals of glorious Indian history as the capital of the ancient Kosala Kingdom. From the Suryavanshi kings of the Ikshvaku dynasty to the Mauryan, Nanda, and Gupta dynasties, the sacred land has been witness to the rule of some of India's greatest empires.

The tranquil ghats of the Saryu River ooze with spirituality

The sprawl of the city, with the striking Hanuman Garhi complex at its centre

For the spiritual wanderer looking for meaning and hope, Ayodhya serves as a tranquil refuge with several highly revered temples like the Hanuman Garhi and the Nageshwarnath Temple. Ayodhya is also one of the most noted places in northern India where Hindu devotees undertake sacred parikramas or circumambulations of prominent religious places. While the city's spectacular evening aarti held on the banks of the river Saryu is truly a sight to behold, the enactment of Ram Leela at the Tulsi Smarak continues to be a huge draw.

On Deepawali Ayodhya's attraction is absolutely unmatched. As part of the vibrant festivities, the city is drenched in the radiance of brightly-lit earthen lamps as tourists from across the country congregate at its ghats to immerse themselves in the serenity of the grand spectacle. Also a must-watch is the colourful procession held in honour of Shree Ram, during which folk artists from different states catch the fancy of visitors with a variety of graceful dance performances.

A NEW DAWN AWAITS

The holy city has seen its share of challenging times, yet it has managed to host devotees in droves, who come here to seek the blessings of their beloved Ramlala. After all these years of turmoil and unrest, Ayodhya will soon regain its prosperity, with the construction of the much-awaited Ram Janmabhoomi. Devotees across the world are waiting with bated breath for the newly-built shrine. Ayodhya is being redeveloped as a pilgrim destination that will match the charms of Varanasi and Mathura.

The historic verdict of the Supreme Court which settled the long-pending and much-debated Ram Janmabhoomi land dispute has come as music to the ears of millions of Ram devotees all over the world. The world has its eyes set on Ayodhya, which will shine like a bright star and Ayodhya will be on the map of world tourism in the years to come. Both the union and state governments are focussed on restoring the historical glory of Ayodhya as a sacred place for Hindus. The city is well and truly all set to undergo a complete makeover. Besides constructing the grand Ram Janmabhoomi as a prominent pilgrimage destination, the government also plans to revamp Ayodhya Dham and Ayodhya.

Above: *Architectural details at Hanumangarhi*
Facing page: *Raja Ravi Varma's painting depicting the* Bharat Milaap *episode*

DID YOU KNOW?

Ayodhya bagged a Guinness World Record when it witnessed the largest display of oil lamps at the Ram Ki Pairi, with the lighting of 6,06,569 lamps on November 14, 2020 during the city's fourth Deepotsav celebrations. The feat was achieved by the Department of Tourism, Government of Uttar Pradesh and Dr Ram Manohar Lohia Avadh University.

Above: *A 3D representation of the much-awaited Ram Temple at Ram Janmabhoomi*
Facing page: *The idol depicting Ramlala seated on his throne*

THE MASTER PLAN FOR AYODHYA

The Uttar Pradesh government has prepared a master plan for transforming Ayodhya into a Smart City. This master plan will aim at the completion of key development projects in the ancient holy town by 2031. To develop the city and equip it with a state-of-the-art modern infrastructure, the government has set up an Ayodhya Pilgrimage Development Council. With the creation of world-class infrastructure, the state government aims to harness the potential of both foreign tourists and Indian nationals. It is estimated that by the year 2022, Ayodhya will attract at least 10 million tourists a year. The government wants to create a Ramayana circuit, with Ayodhya as the main hub.

The majestic plan to revamp the city of Ayodhya includes the installation of ten gates dedicated to the venerable Shree Ram, provision for underground cabling, and construction of a Rain Basera (night shelters) with an accommodation capacity of 10,000 people. Then there's a proposal to convert Ayodhya's Raj Sadan into an upmarket heritage hotel. The government also plans to develop all major public spots and parks in the city to boost tourism. There are several reservoirs across the city, all of which hold special importance due to their connection with Shree Ram, and these will also be repaired and restored. The government also plans to connect the rest of the country with the thematic Ramayana circuit.

A panoramic view of the Ram ki Pairi series of ghats

All aglow: A scenic view of the Ram ki Pairi

The Raj Dwar Mandir, with its familiar spire

THE TEMPLE

The upcoming Ram Temple will stand tall at 161 feet and its three floors will be supported by 318 pillars, featuring intricately carved idols of Hindu deities. The proposed width of the temple is 140 feet. Spread over 69 acres, the temple will have multiple areas where devotees will be able to sit and pray. The structure will be designed to facilitate devotees with a parikrama around the sanctum sanctorum. The temple is also going to feature a Singh Dwar, a garbhagriha, a Nritya Dwar and ranga mandapa. Also in the works to be built in the vicinity of the temple will be a cowshed, resthouse, and Vedic institute along with other religious buildings.

IKSHVAKUPURI: GLIMPSES OF INDIA'S GLORIOUS VEDIC CULTURE

The government also plans to set up a spiritual eco-city in Ayodhya, which will be called Ikshvakupuri after the glorious Ikshvaku dynasty. Inspired by Cambodia's Angkor Wat complex of temples, the township will serve as a haven for spiritual backpackers who are intrigued by India's Vedic culture. The planned green city will stand along the banks of the river Saryu in the area between the Guptar Ghat and the Brahmakund Gurudwara. The establishment of this spiritual-cultural city will mark Ayodhya as a prime destination on the international map of spiritual tourism.

WORLD-CLASS CONNECTIVITY

Efforts to ensure world-class connectivity of the temple town with the rest of the world, are also in place. The government is strengthening and expanding rail, road and air routes to meet the surge in tourist footfall.

Air The Uttar Pradesh government has given its nod for an international airport named Sri Ram Chandra Airport. The proposed airport in Ayodhya will be constructed as a part of the union government's flagship regional connectivity scheme—Ude Desh Ka Aam Naagrik (UDAN).

Rail The union government has approved funds for a modernisation plan for the Ayodhya railway station.

Road An International Bus Terminal with state-of-the-art facilities will be constructed. A four-lane road between Ayodhya and Chitrakoot is also in the offing. Roads connecting Ayodhya to Sultanpur, Basti, Prayagraj and Varanasi would be widened into six-lane for seamless traffic movement.

A NEW AYODHYA BECKONS

It's just a matter of time and a new Ayodhya will be eager to welcome ardent Ram devotees for one of the greatest spiritual experiences of their lives.

Ayodhya

STEEPED IN HISTORY AND MYTHOLOGY

BY PRANNAY PATHAK

"The people of the provinces had come to the city from every quarter to witness Ram's consecration, and they filled his city to overflowing. And as the waves of people rolled in, one could hear a sound like that of the sea when its swell is raised on a full-moon night. The city, resembling Indra's residence, grew so noisy and congested everywhere with spectators arriving from the provinces that it looked like the ocean waters teeming with all the creatures of the deep."

(The Ramayana, Ayodhya-Kaand)

Most people hear about Ayodhya for the first time as a central setting in the Hindu epic of the Ramayana. It is the city of the king Dashratha and the capital of the kingdom of Kosaladesh. As "prosperous as paradise" itself (*Atharvaveda*), the city—one of the *sapta puris*, or seven sacred cities of ancient India (*Skandapurana*)—is also known to be the site of Ram Janmabhoomi, the land where Prince Ram was born and brought up, the city that wept when he was sent away to exile, and the kingdom that celebrated his joyous return 14 years later.

The name 'Ayodhya' comes from King Ayudh, who is believed to have been the first of the forefathers of Shree Ram. The Ramayana states that the city, which lies on the right bank of the river Saryu, was founded by the sage Manu, who had received it from Lord Vishnu. It was ruled by the Surya dynasty of the Ikshvakus.

Also known as Saket up till a certain point in history, Ayodhya came to be known by its present name eventually. The temple to Nageshwarnath, the only one to Shiva in Ram's city, alone survived till the time of Chandragupta Vikramaditya (376-415 CE) and helped him locate Ayodhya.

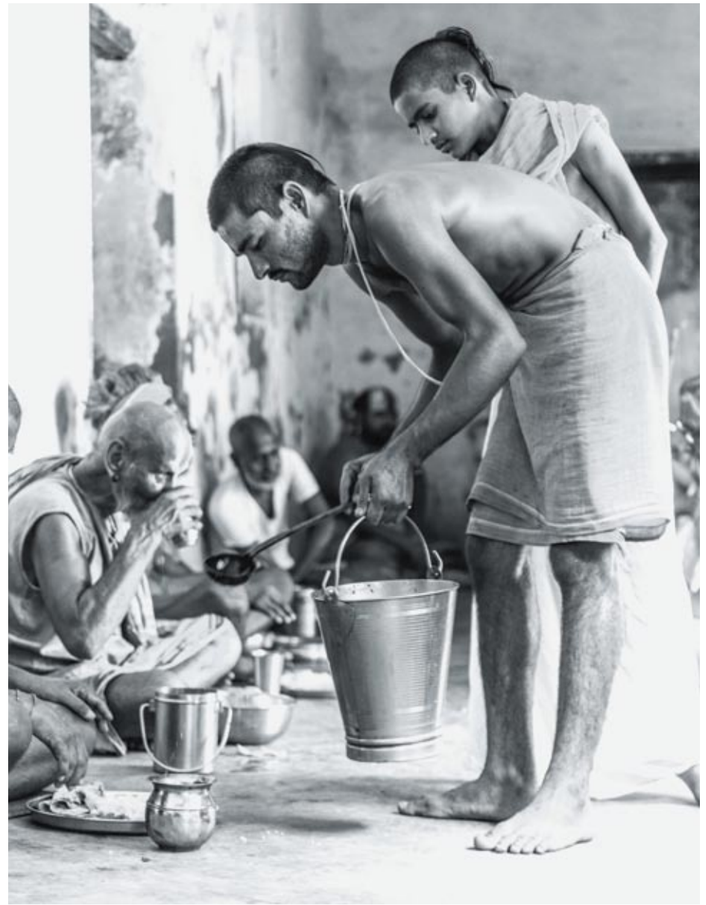
Ironically, Ayodhya, whose names means 'not to be warred against', has suffered bitter religious strife and several foreign attacks throughout history. In the 11th century by Mahmud Ghaznavi's nephew Salar Masud—who was thwarted by the legendary Raja Suheldev and the sadhus of the Digambari *akhada*. Then, the Mughal dynasty's founder Babur, is believed to have issued a *firman* for the construction of a mosque here when he conquered northern India in 1526.

In the 18th century, the Nawabs of Awadh (also Oudh) created a kingdom here. Later, the Nawabs shifted their capital to Lucknow, and Ayodhya fell, once again, into neglect and ruin. Post-independence politics brought Ayodhya into the limelight again, and recently, the site, in 2019, was entrusted to the Hindu community for a grand temple complex dedicated to Shree Ram.

Ayodhya is an equally important site for Buddhists, Jains and Sikhs. The Buddha spent time here in addition to his retreats at neighbouring Shravasti. Five of the Jain tirthankaras were born here, and Sikh Gurus including Guru Nanak Dev are known to have visited it to preach their spiritual message.

Ayodhya also enjoys a uniquely cosmopolitan connect that goes back to 48 CE, when, according to the Korean chronicle *Samguk Yusa*, Suriratna, a local princess is said to have sailed to Korea with 2,200 people in tow. The ship sank, and Suriratna washed up at the shore. The Korean king Su-Ro of the Karak dynasty married her, and she was thence known as Huh/Heo Hwang-ok. To this day, many South Koreans consider the city their maternal home. A memorial to the queen came up in 2001, built using stones that came all the way from South Korea.

A beautiful temple silhouetted against a glorious vermillion sunset



Left: *Feeling blessed in holy Ayodhya*
Above: *No one goes hungry in Shree Ram's land*

Above: *A symbol of divinity, and a holy man*
Facing page: *A temple thronged by devotees*

The Ramcharitmanas

A BEACON OF HOPE FOR HUMANITY

BY KARAN KAUSHIK

Composed by one of the greatest Indian poets—Goswami Tulsidas—Ramcharitmanas is perhaps the greatest ode to the life and times of Shree Rama. Ramcharitmanas literally translates into the 'splendid lake of the deeds of Shree Ram'. Although the Ramcharitmanas or Manas, as it is popularly called, Goswami Tulsidas' poetic genius has made it the most important text in the genre of Ramayana literature.

Highly revered in every Hindu home, the Ramcharitmanas is divided into seven parts or kaands. These are Bal Kaand, Ayodhya Kaand, Aranya Kaand, Kishkindha Kaand, Sunder Kaand, Lanka Kaand and Uttar Kaand. It has nine main stops and 30 sub-stops called Vishrams, which make it easier to read the book. It consists of 12,800 lines divided into 1,073 stanzas. According to mythological legend, Hanumanji once appeared in front of Goswami Tulsidas in Prayagraj and asked him to go to Chitrakoot, where he'll meet Lord Rama. "Chitrakoot ke ghat par bhai santan ki bheer…Tulsidas chandan ghise, tilak det Raghubir."

Goswami Tulsidas met Shree Ram and began writing the Manas on the day of Ram Navami in 1574. He wrote the first three sections in Ayodhya while the last four were written in Varanasi. It took him two years, seven months and 26 days to complete the great scripture.

What makes the Manas great is the unblemished devotion of Goswami Tulsidas for Shree Ram. The book is unarguably one of the greatest works of world literature, thanks to its philosophical poise, unmatched poetic skills, worldly wisdom and spiritual ardour. The Father of the Nation, Mahatma Gandhi, regarded it as the greatest book in the entire devotional literature and called it 'the tallest tree in the magic garden of medieval Hindu poetry,' in his autobiography. "Anyone interested in the religion and culture of Northern India sooner or later encounters a reference to the epic poem Ramcharitmanas and its remarkable popularity," Gandhi-ji wrote.

The Ramcharitmanas is not only a pertinent ancient scripture, but also a way of life. From excelling in studies to getting the desired job to remedying distress to attaining moksha, the Manas can help you at every stage of life with its verses. When the going gets tough and nothing seems to be working in your favour, the Ramcharitmanas will not let you down. What really connects with readers is the fact that the Manas was written in Awadhi. When Goswami Tulsidas composed the epic, bhakti literature was being removed from the classical pedestal of Sanskrit, and being taken to the masses in their own language. It was a deliberate attempt to linguistically democratise devotional literature.

Through the Ramcharitmanas, Goswami Tulsidas tried to address the social problems of his age and his thoughts remain relevant even today. Being the great thinker that Goswami Tulsidas was, he has written about an ideal governing system and why a ruler needs to be socialistic in his policies and actions. The Manas also teaches us ways on how to make our personal, social and ethical life great. It tells us that we must not give up our moral duties even when the circumstances are unfavourable. It tells us how to be a great friend and how to respect even our adversaries.

The Ramcharitmanas has been a beacon of hope since time immemorial and continues to rid us of our miseries and guide us in our challenges. If today's society could adopt the ideals of the Manas and learn a thing or two from its teachings, no power can stop the great nation of India from being a vishwaguru or world leader.

A sage reading the Ramcharitmanas

The grand Guptar Ghat by the banks of the Saryu

The Saryu River

DIVINE WATERS REVEAL MANY A TALE

BY RANEE SAHANEY

From deep antiquity, Vedic hymns reveal to us that the Saryu River, or Saryuji, is one of the divine Sapt Gangas, or Seven Gangas, as are the likes of the Saraswati, Ganga and Yamuna. In the great Hindu epic Ramyana, there are repeated mentions of the hallowed Saryu. On the banks of this sacred river stands one of the seven holiest cities of the Hindu faith. This is Ayodhya, the birthplace of Shree Ram, the blessed Maryada Purushottam—exemplar of the perfect man—and avatar of Vishnuji.

Straddling the banks on both sides of the waterway are a host of temples and minor shrines, dedicated to various deities. The hallowed waters are accessed by clusters of ghats, also considered highly sacred as they are part of the many rituals that a great number of devotees go through, before taking the holy dip either on special occasions, or as part of their daily rituals. The rivers Saryu and Tamasa form the northern and southern borders of the holy places in the city. Most pilgrimages lie within these borders.

There are numerous legends of Shree Ram and his family linked to Saryu, which has played such a pivotal role in their life and times. One legend has it that the river Saryu was brought to Ayodhya by the Sage Vasishtha at the request of the populace, from Lake Mansarovar, where Brahmaji is said to have deposited Vishnuji's tears of joy.

So, Saryu is revered as Vasishtha's daughter. According to the Ramayana, Shree Ram first heard the story from Sage Vishwamitra, of the origin of the river Saryu from Lake Manasa while crossing the river at Anga province and reaching the forest of Tataka.

For all practical purposes, Saryu starts out in the Tibetan Plateau as a stream from the Mansarovar Lake in Mt Kailash—gradually becoming bigger and bigger as it receives the waters of the many streams and rivulets it meets on its journey on its transformation as the perennial Ghagara River. The river joins the Sarda River at Brahmaghat in UP and the Ganga at Revelganj in the neighbouring state of Bihar. The river is considered one of the most important tributaries of the Ghagara.

Tethered to the banks of Saryu are the twin cities of Ayodhya Dham and Ayodhya, once part of the kingdom of Awadh. Both cities (a few kilometres apart) are richly steeped in the Ganga-Jamuni tehzeeb or syncretic culture.

Ever since his birth, Saryu was a constant companion to Shree Ram in his childhood days. It was to her that he would come with his siblings to play on her banks, swim in her lambent waters, take part in spiritual rituals with his family and enjoy the festivities on religious occasions—and as he grew older, come alone sometimes to contemplate in her soothing presence. When he was older,

An ascetic meditates at a pier-like platform across the Saryu, at Ram-ki-Pairi

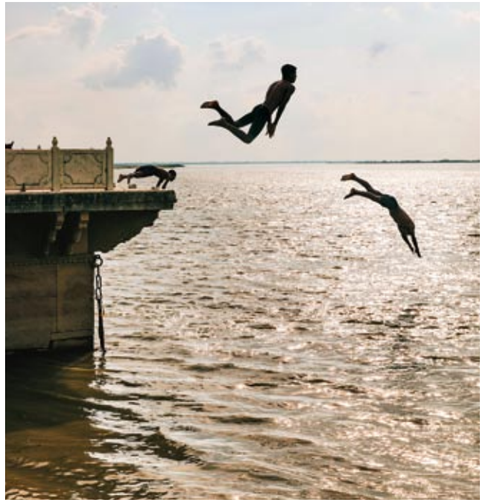
The Saryu gleams with neon lights projected over the Ram-ki-Pairi temples

The nighttime aarti at the Saryu banks is a magnificent spectacle

according to the Ramyana, Ram received the Bala and Atibala mantras from Sage Vishwamitra while travelling along the southern bank of the Saryu. Shree Ram on this journey with the revered sage also visited the Anga province at the confluence of the rivers Ganga and Saryu. There the youthful Ram discovered huge numbers of hermitages and sages performing penance for thousands of years. It is here that Vishwamitra revealed to Shree Ram the tale of the god Shiva burning Kamadeva in this place and making him 'ananga' (bodiless). That was how it got its name, he pointed out. Continuing in the same vein Vishwamitra told him that all the hermitages belonged to Shiva and all the hermits he could see were actually disciples of Shiva. That night Ram spent a night in a hermitage at Anga with the sage.

Shree Ram's family history too is closely linked to the Saryu. It is said that his father King Dashratha, once out on a hunt, hearing a movement in the forest by the river thought it was a wild animal and let go a poisoned arrow. But it was no animal that became the arrow's target—the king had accidently killed Shravan Kumar, legendary for his devotion as a son to his blind parents, for whom he was now fetching water from the Saryu. Learning of Shravan's death from the killer himself they ranted piteously at the hapless Dashratha and brought down a terrible curse on him. Then they too gave themselves up to the divine waters of the Saryu. That dreadful act by the Saryu came back to haunt King Dashratha in his old age, as he suffered from having sent his beloved son Shree Ram into exile for 14 years. King Dashratha, in fact, never saw his son again, because by the time a victorious Ram returned to Ayodhya after defeating Ravana, his father was long gone from this earth.

Another legend reveals to us Shree Ram's final days on earth, as also that of his brothers. The story goes that Ram had a meeting with a sage Kaal Deva (Time) who asked that no one should be allowed into the room. Kaal Deva had come to remind Ram that his time to leave his earthly body was nigh because his duties were over. Now, just before the meeting started, Ram had told his brother Lakshmana to guard the door and let no one in—and that if anyone did enter the room he would kill him. Around this time the belligerent sage Durvasa arrived and insisted on meeting Ram, but Lakshmana refused to let him go in. A furious Durvasa turned round and told Lakshmana if he didn't let him meet Ram, all of Ayodhya, including Lakshmana would bear the brunt of his terrible curse. A visibly shaken Lakshmana entered the room to tell Ram about the sage, but then rushed out to stop Ram committing the sin of killing him. Instead Lakshmana chose to walk into the Saryu where he ended his life with the ritual of jal-samadhi. Devastated by Lakshmana's death, and still grieving for Sitaji (who had given herself up to Mother Earth on being asked by him to prove her virtue once again), Ram too gave himself up to the Saryu, from where he transcended into his avatar as Mahavishnu as he entered the gates of



Boys dive into the holy waters of the Saryu

Vaikunth. Lakshmana on his leaving earth too transcended into his avatar as Sheshnaga.

The place where Ram committed jal-samadhi is immortalised by the hallowed turf of Guptar Ghat, a few kilometres away from Ayodhya, on the banks of the Saryu at Faizabad. Today the site, crowded with many shrines, is a much revered pilgrimage site for Hindus. Lakshmana Ghat marks the place where Lakshmana committed jal-samadhi.

The Saryu riverside is a bustling place all year round. Some of its most prominent ghats are Svargadvara Ghat, Lakshmana Ghat, Janaki Ghat, Papmochan Ghat, Rinmochan Ghat, Raj Ghat, Brahmakunda Ghat, Kaushalya Ghat, and Chakratirtha Ghat.

The 'door to heaven' or the Svargadvara Ghat which connects the Sahastradhara and the temple of Treta Ke Thakur is the most crowded ghat as it's said to be the site of the first tirtha established on the bank of the Saryu River. Ancient texts have it that this sacred spot was established by none other than Vishnuji himself before his seventh incarnation as Ram. According to a report by archaeologist Alexander Cunningham, this was where Shree Ram was cremated—hence its sanctity and importance for pilgrims. Svargadvara comprises seven ghats: Chandrahari, Guptahari, Chakrahari, Vishnuhari, Dharmahari, Bilvahari and Punyahari. Temples around the site include the popular Chandrahari temple, Gangamahal Temple, Saryu Temple and Nageshvaranath Temple and Chaturbhuji Temple. Apart from the temples you will find many buildings which date back to the reign of Nawab Safa Jung in the era of Awadh rule.

The Saryu has shifted its course in a northerly direction in present times. This means it left behind the ghats that had been there for a very long time. So new ghats were built by the river along the new bridge, popularly known as 'Pairi'. Ram ki Pairi Ghat, about 3km away from the city, is deeply imbued with spiritual meaning and bathing here is considered of immense significance. On any single day it is no surprise to find pilgrims in the process of some of the most significant purification rituals by the river—there's the snana, the ritual dip or bath in the river itself, dhyana or meditation on the steps of the ghat, dana, which is donation or alms to the poor who gather here in great numbers; and then there's the cremation of a loved one, held in proximity to the sacred river.

The Saryu's ghats and shrines are so crowded during auspicious days it gets really difficult for pilgrims to even get a foothold. The festivals of Dussehra and Diwali are perfect examples of this. But nothing takes away from the happiness of the pilgrims as they wait in wonderment for their turn to do the prescribed rituals for these events. An iconic event in the annals of the Saryu's history was the record six lakh earthen lamps that were lit on the banks of the river as part of the state government's Deepotsav celebrations on the eve of Diwali. Again in 2019 the evening aarti performed on the Saryu banks was a spectacular affair when the Supreme Court on November 9 gave its verdict on the centuries-old Ayodhya land dispute. On Ram Navami, Shree Ram's birthday, lakhs of devotees congregate by the Saryu to take the ritual snana in the divine waters.

The city of Ayodhya is revered as one of the seven Mokshdayini Saptpuris or the seven noble tirthas for Hindus. All pilgrimage journeys linked to this region start clockwise with firstly taking a sacred bath in the Saryu and performing the prescribed ritual of moral bondage (sankalpa) for performing the pilgrimage journey—the journey ends with the process of getting release from this bondage.

Ayodhya Shodh Sansthan (Research Institute)

A TREASURE TROVE OF AYODHYA'S CULTURAL AND TRADITIONAL HERITAGE

BY KARAN KAUSHIK

One of Ayodhya's major attractions is the Tulsi Smarak Bhawan, set up in 1969 as a homage to the 16th-century poet-philosopher Goswami Tulsidas. A great figure of world literature, Tulsidas is best remembered for authoring the Ramcharitmanas and the Hanuman Chalisa. The Bhawan plays host to various religious ceremonies and prayer meetings, and invites veteran artists for cultural performances. Besides housing a repository of the works of Tulsidas, the building is also home to the Ayodhya Shodh Sansthan/Research Institute.

Founded on August 18, 1986, under the aegis of the Culture Department of the Uttar Pradesh government, the research institute was formed to research the historical significance of Ayodhya and the emergence of Vaishnavism and the Bhakti movement. One of its prime goals is to preserve the ancient documents of the Avadh region. The organisation is aimed at promoting awareness about Ayodhya's glorious culture and tradition. The research centre works towards studying and ascribing historical significance to Ayodhya's literary, cultural, and spiritual traditions. The centre is equipped with a world-class library housing some of the rarest texts available on the life and times of Shree Ram. There's also a permanent exhibition, which showcases attractive art and craft inspired by the Ramayana. Daily recitals of Ramkatha are also held at the institute along with a year-round Ram Leela.

The vibrant exterior of the Ayodhya Shodh Sansthan

The Ayodhya Research Institute is also preparing an 'Encyclopaedia of Ramayana' and aims to trace Shree Ram's footprints across the world by documenting every tangible and intangible legacy of the Ramayana. The organisation intends to take Shree Ram's saga beyond mythology and establish his presence globally. The research project will showcase India's cultural-religious legacy to the world and academic activities for the same are on in full swing. The institute is working in close coordination with countries in Southeast Asia, Central Asia, the Caribbean, and Europe to bring the document into its final shape. The encyclopaedia will have 100 volumes in all, making it a voluminous research document of great cultural value.

At present, the research institute is also conducting a six-month online certificate course aimed at educating people from foreign nations on the enactment of the legendary Ram Leela. Students from the US, Canada, South America, Caribbean countries and Mauritius have enrolled in the course. The institute also plans to invite at least five student groups from the course to perform at the Deepotsav, which is held during Deepawali.

RAMKATHA SANGRAHALAYA

The Ramkatha Museum here was established in 1988 and exhibits a great collection of antiquities belonging to ancient times. The museum enlightens visitors with a historical perspective on Ayodhya. On display are sundry terracotta objects, metal exhibits, textiles, and sculptures dating back to the 11th century. The museum is of special interest to history buffs, who can explore a special gallery that exhibits the belongings of Gumnami Baba, who is believed by many to have been Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose in disguise during his time in Ayodhya.

Music is a very powerful binding tool when it comes to religious gatherings

The Musical Tradition of Ayodhya

BY YATINDRA MISHRA

It is a matter of indescribable astonishment to see that often in Ayodhya's temples, in the middle of the congratulatory songs sung on Ramnavami, Sharad Poornima, Jhulanotsav, Dev Deepavali and Holi, the constant kirtan of 'Sitaram' somehow always finds its way.

It is illustrative of the kind of status this iconic, fundamental tradition enjoys in the cultural fabric of the city. It goes on in numerous temples that serve as bastions of arts aesthetes. Those who have been frequent visitors to the likes of Kanak Bhawan, Sadguru Sadan, Rangmahal Mandir, Ramsakhi Mandir and Lakshmana Qila, would agree that to hear versions that are set to carefully scored instrumental compositions and performed by artists of the highest pedigree, is an experience like no other.

Another extension of the Ram-naam tradition is the reading of episodes from the Ramcharitmanas and the Ramayana that goes on without interruption, every day, in Ayodhya's temples and shrines. For instance, in the much-anticipated month of Shravan, the Phulwari episode from the Ramcharitmanas is recited with music, at Siyaram Kila, Jhunki Ghat Mandir. At other places such as Ramsakhi Mandir, Divyakala Kunj and Rangmahal Mandir, quatrains from the Ramcharitmanas and the Ramayana are sung in addition to portions from Vinay Patrika and Ram Raksha Stotra and Sri Ramastvaraj.

It's evident that the expanse of literature composed in devotion to Ram and its recitation and singing are all part of a grand Raam-naam sankirtan (devotional, congregational chanting of a verse) tradition that lends Ayodhya's culture somewhat of a unique character.

KANAK BHAWAN: THE ROUTINE SONGS OF THE ASHTAYAM SEVA

The most important and most charming temple for Ram worship in Ayodhya is the Kanak Bhawan. It was initially renovated by King Vikramaditya and later rebuilt by Vrishbhanu Kunwari Devi. The maharani wrote bhakti-style verses to Ram and Sita in the rasik style, and has two books called *Hori Rahas and Jhulan Rahas*, published in her name.

As for Kanak Bhawan, it is believed that this temple was made of gold (hence, 'kanak') and was presented by Ram's stepmother Kaikeyi to Sita as a wedding gift. It is recognised as an important centre of *madhuropasana* (sweet devotion), and lays claim to a century-old tradition where it is customary to organise musical gatherings on important occasions. It is probably the prime spot in the city when it comes to treating oneself to the melodious songs of birth, jhula, holi, kajri, marriage, phool-bangla, rath yatras, parikramas and melas.

Interestingly, some of the country's prominent artists, whenever on a visit to Ayodhya for a performance, have traditionally chosen Kanak Bhawan among all other sites for their presentations, be it Pt Maniram, Pt Jasraj, Pt Mahadev Prasad Mishra, Pts Rajan and Sajan Mishra, mridang maestros Swami Bhagwandas and Swami Pagaldas, Pt Gaurishankar Maharaj, Malini Awasthi, Kalpana Barman and countless others.

THE KABIRPANTHI MUSIC TRADITION OF AYODHYA

A formless aesthetic emanates from the works of faqirs, qalandars, avdhutas, jogis and bairagis, which we know as the Kabirpanthi musical tradition. This school of music now enjoys massive popularity not just throughout India, but also Pakistan, seen in the work of a long line of artists including Pt Kumar Gandharv, Pt Chhannulal Mishra, Madhup Mudgal, the Sabri brothers, Prahlad Singh Tipania, Mukhtiyar Ali, Iddu Sharif, Abida Parveen and others.

Ayodhya is home to a maddening array of musical traditions, and the cup forever overflows with the influx of other styles and schools of the Ramkatha that accompanied those who settled here. However, it is often noticed that these styles aren't always able to transform completely or to find new forms that are different from their origins due to religious limitations. However, a new style of music is blossoming in Ayodhya—that of Kabir's poetry and music. The Kabir Math of Jiyanpur has turned into a hotbed for this new movement, where Kapirpanthis congregate in huge numbers. This is the kind of liberating force that Kabir's poetry and music are suffused with.

This music that is played on simple instruments such as the iktara or the khanjari doesn't depend on the specifics of beat or metre. The Kabirpanthi poet Sant Pathik-ji Maharaj, who would often travel to Ayodhya, chose the khanjari—a tambourine—as his instrument of choice. It's probably the reason these instruments are popular here.

THE LAKSHMANA QILA TRADITION: FESTIVE SONGS

In Ayodhya, devotion to Ram enjoys a passionate fervour in the opulent Lakshmana Qila, which is regarded as the residence of the former's younger brother. It was founded by the renowned saint-poet Yuglanand Sharan-ji Maharaj, 75 of the 95 epics written by whom are still safe in the Lakshmana Qila. The custom of dance and music programmes on festive occasions here is over 150 years old, and their basis can be located in the verses composed by Yuglanand Sharan-ji and other saint-poets and philosophers belonging to the same tradition. This is also true for the *rasikopasana* that is seen all over Ayodhya; poets such as Yugalpriya, Rasikali, Rasmala, Preetilata, Hemlata, Sheelmani, Baijnath, Charushila and Shivdayal have been instrumental in establishing this tradition.

This tradition reached its zenith when Swami Sitaram Sharan-ji Maharaj had more of such poetic works compiled and published for the reading of more people. Padavalis (poetry collections) such as the *Janmotsav Badhai Padavali, Sri Vasant Vihar Padavali and Sri Jhulan Vihar Padavali*, are still published and distributed at the Qila.

SONGS OF JHULANOTSAV

Usually, at the time of the Shravan Jhula, the beautiful tableaux and musical programmes of Kanak Bhawan, Hanumangarhi, Janki Mahal, Bara Sthan, Lakshmana Qila and the royal family's palace are the talk of the town. Classical singing, bandish performances, thumri, dadra, khayal, kajri, and bhajan gatherings—aficionados usually have little problem in finding their jam. Lovely and enchanting Kathak performances

A Ram Leela performance in progress during the Ayodhya Deepotsav

are also held in Ayodhya during the Shravan Jhula. On the third day of the festival, devotees reach Mani Parvat with the images and idols of deities from their homes and hang swings from tree branches to lovingly rock their beloved Ram and Kishori-ji. It is common to hear groups of women from neighbouring villages sing the rustic ditty: "*Jhula padha Mani Parvat par jhulein Avadh Bihari na*."

It is believed that the idea of Jhulanotsav is not about praying for salvation and worldly benefits, but participation in the merry matrimony of Ram and Sita, addressed locally as Siyaram. It is this devotional aspect that is expressed in the works of eminent saint-poets writing about Shravan Jhula, including Swami Agradas, Kripaniwas, Yuglananyasharan, Ramsakhe, Modlata, Roopkala, Ramvallabhsharan, Premlata. It is based on the works of these great writers that the several local artists and those from far away present their performances, all over Ayodhya. Maniram Chhavni, Kosalesh Sadan, Kaleram Mandir and Lakshman Qila feature some of the best artists.

THE SADHAKAS OF AYODHYA

The world-famous mridang maestro Baba Ramshankardas Pagaldas has a special place in Ayodhya's larger musical tradition. The man was also honoured with the Sangeet Natak Academy's award. Also memorable are the bhajan singers Bhagwat Kishore 'Vyakul', Pt Dayashankar Mishra and Pt Pandit Chandraprakash Mishra, all of whom are no more. On Ram Navami, you could find Pt Gaurishankar Maharaj singing in temples across Ayodhya for livelihood.

Also noteworthy is the mehfil and local theatre tradition that existed before Independence, during the time of the Ayodhya Riyasat. The artists that were a part of it include Akhtaribai Faizabadi, who used to perform at mehfils from 1937 to 1943, and the famed singer Tarabai, who was a common feature during Jhulanotsav and Janmashtami. Shehnai exponent Mohammad Sher Ali, who enjoyed the patronage of the royal house, is known for his Prabhati Shehnai on Dussehra and Holi. Kallu Kathik's ramkatha was a regular feature on Bharat Milap and Rajgaddi during Ramlila.

The Lord Knows No Borders

AYODHYA'S GLOBAL INFLUENCE

BY KARAN KAUSHIK

Praising the Ramayana in 1864, French historian Jules Michelet wrote: *"Let me look towards lofty Asia, and the profound East for a little while. There lies my great poem, as vast as the Indian ocean, blessed, gilded with the sun, the book of divine harmony wherein there is no dissonance."*

The legend of Shree Ram has been one of the greatest cultural contributions of India to the world, and has transcended all cultural and religious boundaries across the world. Through the ages and civilisations, Ram and Ayodhya have not only been popular for the people of India but have also been inspirational for people across the world. The teachings of the great epic Ramayana have led people all over the world to follow the path of dharma or righteousness. Popular and revered the world over, the epic has influenced various cultures and civilisations other than India.

Ancient Indians travelled to different parts of the world through sea routes, and with them travelled the story of the Ramayana. Such master navigators spread the wisdom of the epic far and wide. Since then, Shree Ram's story has been told numerous times in different parts of the world. This has resulted in the emergence of various versions of the Ramayana in countries like Thailand, Burma, Cambodia, Philippines, Japan, China, Mongolia, among others.

While the greatest son of Ayodhya may have reached every corner of the world in one form or the other, it's interesting to note that Ayodhya shares really special relations with countries like Thailand and Korea. Did you know that there lived a princess in Ayodhya who married a king from Korea? Or that Thailand's ancient capital is called Ayutthaya? Then there's the Iranian scripture Avesta, which shares many similarities with the Ramayana, and mentions the Sarayu river as Horayu. Countries like Thailand, Korea and Indonesia share distinctive connections with Ayodhya, due to which India has been able to nurture close historical ties with them over the years.

THE KOREAN CONNECTION

Thousands of South Koreans visit Ayodhya year in, year out to pay obeisance to their ancestor. According to a popular Korean legend, princess of Ayodhya Heo Hwang-ok, also known as Suriratna travelled all the way to Korea 2,000 years ago to tie the knot with King Kim Suro of Geumgwan Gaya. The royal couple is heralded as the ancestors of more than two-thirds of Koreans today.

Their wedding has been documented in the ancient Korean text *Samguk Yusa*. The text mentions King Suro's queen as a princess of a distant kingdom called Ayuta, which people relate to present-day Ayodhya. It is believed that King Suro and Queen Heo Hwang-ok formed the celebrated Karak dynasty by uniting different kingdoms of Korea. The legend of the queen has brought India and South Korea together. Recently, South Korean first lady Kim Jung-sook also paid a visit to India in 2018 to strengthen the bilateral ties between India and South Korea. The first lady also participated in the ground-breaking ceremony of a massive memorial which is being built in the memory of Queen Heo Hwang-ok.

AYUTTHAYA: A LAND STRANGELY FAMILIAR

The enduring impact of the Ramayana also reverberates in Thailand. From its national epic to the names of its kings, the country's religious culture has been hugely impacted by the life of Shree Ram. The ancient capital of Thailand is called Ayutthaya. Located at a distance of 80km from Bangkok, Ayutthaya was named after Ayodhya by King Ramathibodi in 1350. The king visualised an ideal Ramarajya for his kingdom. The glorious island city of Ayutthaya stood at the confluence of the Chao Phraya, Pasak and Lopbhuri rivers as the envy of not only its neighbours but also trading Europeans. As many as a million people belonging to 40 nationalities lived in the magnificent city. Ayutthaya flourished as a Buddhist kingdom from the 14th century to the 18th century. Over the years, Ayutthaya faced several invasions but the Chakri dynasty restored the Buddhist temple here, which continues to be a huge draw for tourists to this day.

The Prambanan Temple in Yogyakarta, Indonesia is a testament to Ayodhya as the inspiration behind the city's rich culture and heritage

When Ayutthaya was attacked by Burmese soldiers in the 18th century, the city got a new king, who called himself Rama I and established Bangkok. He also wrote the epic Ramakien, the Thai version of the Ramayana. His son Rama II wrote a shorter adaptation of it. King Rama I was so impressed with the story that he even got scenes from the epic painted as murals on the walls of the magnificent Emerald Buddha Temple, which stands next to the Thai King's grand palace. This temple is believed to have been modelled on the lines of the temple in Ayutthaya, which was destroyed over the years. The story of Ramayana continues to remain an integral part of Thai culture and a prominent theme of classical Thai dance-dramas.

The Ramayana and Ramakien are great reminders of the strong cultural ties shared by India and Thailand. A Ram temple is being constructed on the banks of the river Chao Phraya in the heart of Bangkok and the construction of this temple will help in spreading the message of Shree Ram globally.

YOGYAKARTA: AN AYODHYA IN INDONESIA

In Indonesia, the Ramayana has lived in the hearts of people for over 2,000 years. A tri-weekly ballet of Ramayana is still performed at Yogyakarta's Prambanan Temple, which is dedicated to the Hindu trinity of Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh. Scenes from the Ramayana are also engraved on the walls of the temple. Ramayana's elements and characters are fundamental to the cultural consciousness of Indonesia and although the Javanese version of the epic is called Kakawin Ramayana, its essence is the same.

The name Yogyakarta has its roots in Ayodhyakarta, meaning Ayodhya, the peaceful city where the ruler rules with nobility. Some scholars have another version of the meaning, which has been drawn from Hindu-Javanese mythology. According to them, *Yogya* means suitable and *karta* stands for prosperous, which makes the meaning of Yogyakarta a city that is fit to prosper.

Once the capital of the Indonesian Republic during the Indonesian National Revolution, Yogyakarta has also been modelled on the sacred town of Ayodhya and is home to age-old temples, ancient culture and magnificent natural attractions. A centre of classical Javanese fine art and culture, it's also renowned as a centre of higher education.

For whom the bells toll

THE MANY FACETS OF SHREE RAM

BY KARAN KAUSHIK

Over three decades ago, when a TV show based on the epic Ramayana aired on Sunday mornings in India, the country came to a standstill. Streets would be deserted, shops would shut and cinemas would cancel their morning shows. All the country wanted was to know about the life of their favourite hero and god Shree Ram. The undying love and devotion of Indians towards their beloved Ram can be testified from the fact that, three decades later, the re-broadcast of Ramayana smashed viewership records worldwide. People found solace in watching the story of Ram in the gloomy times of the COVID-19 pandemic.

"Tera Ram-ji karenge beda paar, udaasi mann kahe ho kare…" ("Shree Ram will take care of you, why do you feel sad?"). All of us have heard this beautiful bhajan at some point, and it has unfailingly lifted our spirits in times of despair. The affection of Indians for their Ram Bhagwan is unparalleled. The veracity of this fact lies in the undiminished respect for the epic Ramayana even after more than three millennia. We know the story like the back of our hand. For us, Maryada Purushottam Shree Ram is the *adarsh purush* or the ideal man. He is our beloved Ramlala...our Ramji...our creator, guide, companion. Ram is an endless fountainhead of virtues who stood for truth, forgiveness, gratitude, compassion, duty and gentleness. He is the one who liberates the blessed from the cycle of birth and death.

Born of the sun dynasty to Raja Dashratha and Rani Kaushalya as the seventh incarnation of Vishnuji, Ram is perhaps the most heroic character of Hindu mythology. Indians and people across Southeast Asia worship him with great devotion, especially in the Awadh region, home to his birthplace Ayodhya. Ram was born at the end of the Treta Yug with the purpose of destroying the evil forces on earth. According to mythology, the gods had to request Vishnuji to take birth as Prince Ram to put an end to the growing atrocities of the fearsome demon king Ravana. Since then, Shree Ram has been worshipped as Brahmanya or the supreme Godhead.

Shree Yogi Adityanath, Hon'ble CM Uttar Pradesh, welcomes artistes dressed as Shree Ram, Sitaji and Lakshmana during the Deepotsav in Ayodhya

An embodiment of kindness, the lotus-eyed Ram personifies auspiciousness. Adorned with fine locks of hair covering his forehead and a charming smile, Ram's moon-like face is a source of eternal bliss for his devotees. Shree Ram is respected by all as Shrimate and adored by the sages, the mortals and even by Lord Shiva and Brahmaji. The upholder of dharma or righteousness, the great scion of the Raghu clan is respected for his truthfulness. "Raghukul reet sada chali aai, praan jaai par vachan na jaai"… Shree Ram stood true to this famous phrase when he agreed to leave the princely comforts of Ayodhya and go to the forests for a 14-year-long exile, only to honour his father King Dashratha's promise to his wife Kaikeyi. Unrivalled in wisdom and skill, Ram is invincible and dignified, even in distress.

In an age when polygamy was totally acceptable, Shree Ram only loved his wife, Goddess Sita, and never once set eyes on any other woman. Today, the divine couple is seen as a true symbol of marital devotion. To earn the love and respect of Goddess Sita, Shree Ram had to participate in a swayamvar organised by Sita's father King Janaka of Mithila. Raja Janaka had promised the princess in marriage to anyone who would bend a huge bow, which belonged to Lord Shiva. While everyone failed, Shree Ram with his divine strength not only bent the bow but also broke it in half.

Shree Ram respected everyone, even his enemies. He was not very pleased when Lakshmana had to cut the nose of Surpanakha, Ravana's sister, who was smitten by Shree Ram's beauty and fell in love with him. When Shree Ram rejected her advances, she tried to attack Sita and Lakshmana had to cut off her nose. Shree Ram respected women and wasn't pleased with how things went. His respect for everyone can also be seen from the fact that after he had killed Ravan, he handed over his body to his family with utmost grace and integrity, and even consoled Ravana's brother Vibhishana. Shree Ram never blamed his stepmother Kaikeyi for sending him into exile. He believed that it was the wheel of fortune which was responsible. Such integrity is impossible to find in today's age.

Indian art portrays Ram as a youthful man with green or blue skin, draped in a yellow robe and holding a bow and arrow. He is most often seen with Goddess Sita, his brother Lakshmana and his devout Hanuman, collectively known as Ram Parivar. Shree Ram is omnipresent. He can be seen on walls, as sculptures, on billboards and posters. The king may have been born centuries ago, but his legend will live on till eternity. He is beyond reason and vision. He has no beginning or end. He is Narayana—the eternal divinity.

Shree Ram and Sitaji fly back to Ayodhya in the Pushpak Vimaan after Ravana's defeat and the completion of their vanvaas

The Legend of Mata Sita

BY KARAN KAUSHIK

There would be hardly any Indian who has not been greeted by a jovial "Jai Siya Ram" in his or her lifetime. Jai Siya Ram is not just a greeting. It symbolises the reverence our nation has for Shree Ram and his consort Sita. It would not be an exaggeration to say that Shree Ram is incomplete without Sita Ji or Mata Sita, as Hindus fondly address her. If Ram is known for his truthfulness, Sita ji is loved for her courage, self-sacrificing nature and purity.

Worshipped as an incarnation of Lord Vishnu's consort Goddess Lakshmi, Mata Sita embodies wifely devotion. She was raised by Mithila Naresh King Janak and Queen Sunaina. Many mythological legends surround her birth. According to the Valmiki Ramayana and Ramcharitmanas, once the Mithila region (in present-day Bihar) was going through a drought. King Janaka conducted a yagna to make things better and as a result, Mata Sita sprang from a furrow when King Janak was ploughing his field. Some legends also suggest that Mata Sita was, in fact, the daughter of the demon king Ravana and his wife Mandodari and she was born as a reincarnation of Vaidvati.

However, the legend that suggests that Mata Sita was born out of the earth has more acceptance, which is why she is also considered as the daughter of Bhumidevi Goddess Earth. Since she was brought up by King Janak, she is also referred to as Janaki in Indian mythology. King Janaka ruled over Mithila and hence, Mata Sita is also known as Maithili. Another name by which devotes address her by is Vaidehi, since King Janak was also known as Videha.

It was not easy for anyone to win over Mata Sita at her swayamwar. Even Shree Ram had to bend Lord Shiva's bow to win her hand in marriage. As a young girl, Mata Sita was spotted by Sage Parashuram when she was playing with Lord Shiva's bow. On seeing this, the sage had advised King Janak to marry her to the man who could bend the bow and tie its string.

Mata Sita is the epitome of womanhood for all Indian women. When Shree Ram was asked to leave Ayodhya and live in the jungle for a period of fourteen years, Mata Sita willingly renounced the comfort and joys of her palace and chose to join her beloved husband in exile.

The most integral part of the epic Ramayana involves the abduction of Mata Sita by Ravana, the demon king of Sri Lanka, and the subsequent rescue by Lord Rama and his battalion of apes. Ravana had kept Mata Sita in Ashok Vatika after abducting her. He expressed his desire for Mata Sita several times while she was in captivity but she refused his advances and kept her chastity intact.

After Shree Ram and his army managed to rescue Mata Sita from Lanka, she was asked to go through an agnipariksha to prove her purity. While some versions of the Ramayana suggest that the god of fire appeared before Shree Ram during this test and gave him the real Sita and told him that it was an illusionary Sita that had been kidnapped by Ravana, some versions say that Mata Sita had voluntarily entered the fire and, as she stepped in it, the coal turned into lotuses.

Mata Sita was once again sent to exile after Shree Ram abandoned her as his wife. During this period, she stayed in Sage Valmiki's ashram and gave birth to her sons Luv and Kush. Once the princes were united with their father, Mata Sita decided to take her final refuge in the arms of Bhumidevi. When she requested Goddess Earth to give her salvation from life, the earth suddenly split open and took Mata Sita away with her.

Old structures, new lives:
An interesting street
in Ayodhya

Ayodhya

LANDMARKS OF DIVINITY

BY RANEE SAHANEY

Ayodhya's heritage zones are an immersive canvas of the most popular tourist sites in the city. Filled with ghats and temples of deep antiquity and religious significance, these are an exceptional illustration of living heritage in one of India's top spiritual centres, Ayodhya, cited by Hindu scriptures to be the birthplace and family home of Shree Ram.

The **Riverside Heritage Zone** consists of a host of ghats and temples, both old and new. Scattered alongside the monasteries and built heritage are a smattering of luxurious structures built by the nobility and prominent townsmen from the 18th century till the present day.

The **Ramkot Heritage Zone** also features quite a few ghats and Hindu temples. No new constructions are permitted by law in the vicinity of Ramkot, to avoid interrupting security of the Ram Janmabhoomi.

The **Mani Parvat Zone** is where Mani Parvat (a mound) is situated,and it dates back to 400 CE. This hillock is known for the Ram-Sita temple and the festivities of the annual Shravan Jhula Festival.

The sprawling ghats of the Saryu

Above: *The venerable Ram-ki-Pairi, seen through an arch*
Facing page: *The stately Raj Sadan palace*

The colours of divinity—red and yellow—on the exterior of the Birla Mandir, are complemented well by the surrounding greenery

A park close to Ram ki Pairi with the popular Rama and Hanuman statues installed recently

The vibrant and imposing exterior of the Hanumangarhi Temple in Ayodhya

Next page Left: *The colourful and intricate interiors of Hanumangarhi*
Next page Right: *An imposing doorway at one of the ghats on the Saryu*

HANUMAN GARHI

It is a stiff haul up to reach the second-most important temple in Ayodhya. This fortified structure, with bastions in each corner, marks the shrine dedicated to Hanumanji, a devotee and fierce protector of Shree Ram. It is, therefore, quite appropriate that it stands quite close to the Ram Janmabhoomi Mandir site on the hilly contours of Ramkot. Pilgrims had to first visit Hanuman to get his permission to visit Shree Ram's shrine. The story is that Hanuman is also a protector of Ayodhya from his vantage point on Ramkot. The statue of Hanuman in fact is quite small, about 6", but it doesn't take away from the deep veneration this shrine attracts especially on the occasion of Hanuman Jayanti and Ram Navami, when it's all lit up.

ग्राम - पिकौरा - हरया
जिला - बस्ती
म
रा
सी
सीताराम
हरेकृष्ण

The bright façade of Kanak Bhawan

KANAK BHAWAN

The Kanak Mahal was gifted by Raja Dashratha's queen Kaikeyi, for her daughter-in-law Sita, wife of Dashratha's eldest son Ram. King Vikramaditya rebuilt it after it was damaged. Kanak Bhawan was once again rebuilt by Rani Vrishbhanu Kunwari. The temple that you see today is maintained by the Tikamgarh and Orchha royals who are its trustees. The sanctum is home to statues of Shree Ram and Goddess Sita in Kanak Bhawan which lies northeast of the Ram Janmabhoomi site. One of the famous parikramas undertaken by devotees here is the Antargrahi parikarma. Pilgrims first bathe in the Saryu, then move on to the Nageshwarnath Temple, Ram Ghat, Sita Kund, Mani Parbat and Brahma Kund, before arriving at the Kanak Bhawan.

The development of the Ramcharitmanas katha tradition has undergone many interesting phases. One may trace this 'in part through manuscript commentaries on the epic composed by eminent Ramyanis' as noted by Philip Lutgendorf in his book The Life of a Text: Performing the Ramcaritmanas of Tulsidas. It recounts how a young man called Ramkumar Mishra (c. 1850-1920) was trained in Benaras by the famous 19th-century expounder Munshi Chakkanlal (then well in his 90s) as an adhikari (authority) of his own katha. There's a story that Ram Kumar had been invited to deliver the katha in the Kanak Bhavan over two months to a packed courtyard. Now, the great patron of the temple, the Maharaja of Tikamgarh, who was to attend the last day's performance, got delayed and assumed that the performance would be extended for a day. But Ram Kumar firmly refused to comply saying that the duration of the programme had been fixed and announced in Ram's own darbar (his 'court' in Kanak Bhavan, said to be the site of Ram and Sita's palace), and it could not be changed to suit the convenience of a mere earthly king.

It's interesting to note that one of the most eminent Ramyanis in Ayodhya today is Sadhvi Mandakini Ram Kinkar.

The patterned courtyard of Kanak Bhawan Temple

Another view of the Kanak Bhawan, showcasing the beautiful arches

An aerial view of the majestic exterior of Kanak Bhawan

The rich colours of grand old Dasharatha Mahal

DASHRATHA MAHAL

Located at the site of King Dasharatha's palace, it is where Shree Ram and his siblings spent their childhood and teenage years. Recitation from the scriptures and soothing bhajans can be heard in its peaceful interiors and courtyard. The temple houses idols of Ram and Sita and brothers Lakshmana, Bharata and Shatrughna. The bhavan is also referred to as Bada Asthan and Badi Jagah. Its somnolence is broken during the festivities of Ram Vivah, Deepavali, Shravan Mela, Chaitra Ramnavami and Kartik Mela. Dasharatha Mahal is no stranger to religious entertainment and has staged water shows and large-scale reenactments of the great epic by the Saryu River.

SUGRIVA QUILA

Steeped in the spiritual calm that transcends all realms, the Sugriva Temple is located in the Hanuman Garhi area of Ayodhya city and is an ASI Site. Such is the power of this magical temple, that it is said to repel and destroy enemies at the mere sight of it. King Bharata, brother of Shree Ram, built the famous Sugriva Quila upon the latter's return to Ayodhya from his vanvas. This temple is also considered a training centre for religious teaching. Festivals such as Ramnavami, Guru Purnima and Janmashtami are fervently celebrated here.

The colourful and profusely detailed interiors of Dasharatha Mahal

NAGESHWARNATH TEMPLE

The much-revered Nageshwarnath Temple, close to Ram-ki-Pairi, is believed to have been established by Shree Ram's son Kush. The temple's name is an allusion to Lord Shiva, who is often depicted with the serpent king Vasuki around his neck (Nageshwarnath loosely translates to 'Lord of the snakes'). The main attraction at this temple is the grand occasion of Mahashivratri, when there is a swarm of devotees to watch the splendid Shiv Baraat procession that is taken out during the celebrations.

KAALE RAM MANDIR

A little-known mandir in the nook and crannies of the Ram-ki-Pairi, this tiny temple is situated behind the Nageshwarnath Temple. They say that one visit to this quaint temple dedicated to the dark-complexioned Ram will have one's prayers answered. The famous sandhya aarti at this temple continues to draw determined devotees despite its obscurity. Its counterpart dedicated to the fair-complexioned Ram, the Gore Ram Mandir, is situated close by.

MANI PARBAT

Steeped in legend, the 65ft-high Mani Parbat is associated with the episode in the Ramayana, about Lakshmana being wounded in the battle by Meghnada, and the only medicine that was any good to revive the dying warrior prince was the Sanjeevani Buti. When Hanuman rushed back with the uprooted mountain on which the healing herb was growing, a chunk of the mountain fell off at this spot that we know today as the much-venerated Mani Parbat. The mound is crowded with many shrines big and small. The Shravan Jhula Mela Festival is a big draw for devotees here during the rainy season.

TULSI SMARAK BHAWAN

Built in 1969 in the memory of noted 16th-century poet-saint Tulsidas, the resplendent Tulsi Smarak Bhawan features a well-stocked library of hundreds of granths and books and Tulsi literature that are a boon for researchers and historians. Travelling with friends from Benaras for the Ramnavami festivities, Goswami Tulsidas was inspired to pen his historic Ramcharitmanas in this holy town by the Saryu. Tulsi Smarak Bhawan was built under the aegis of the former Uttar Pradesh Governor Shri Vishwanath Das, who gave it the name it goes by today. In the year 1986, the famous Ayodhya Shodh Sansthan was established under the aegis of the UP government. Tulsi Jayanti is celebrated on a grand scale at its premises.

TRETA-KE-THAKUR SHRINE

Dedicated to Ram, it marks the site where the Lord of the Treta Yug is said to have conducted the Ashwamedha sacrifice to celebrate his victory over Ravana. The shrine also features idols of Sita, Rama's younger brothers Lakshmana, Bharata and Shatrughna, his guru Vasishtha, King Sugriva and Hanuman. The new temple was built by the Raja of Kullu on the site over three centuries ago and later improved upon by Ahilya Bai Holkar of Indore.

SRI KATHIYA MANDIR

Set near the serene Vasudev Ghat, the grandeur of this temple knows no bounds. It is close to a cantonment area, near the ashram of Bharat Das Maharaj who is believed to have completed 12 years of penance here and later founded the Triveni Dham.

QUEEN HEO HWANG-OK MEMORIAL PARK

Indian and Korea have ancient links that are being revived here in Ayodhya from where the Queen Suriratna, also called Heo Hwang-ok, left home for Gimae in Korea about 2,000 years ago and started the Karak dynasty by marrying king Kim Suro. In 2000, the Mayor of Kim-Hae city in South Korea even invited Ayodhya to sign a sister-city bond. This led to several research projects to underpin the link between Ayodhya and Korea. In 2001, a memorial park with a plaque was built for her on the west bank of the Saryu by the Korean government. Ayodhya's erstwhile ruler B.M. Mishra, father of noted Ayodhya poet Prince Yatindra Mishra, was invited to Korea as a special guest to attend the memorial ceremony. In 2018, South Korean First Lady Kim Jung-sook was the chief guest of the Yogi Adityanath government of Uttar Pradesh during Deepotsav celebrations on November 6, 2019. Also on her schedule was her attendance at the 'groundbreaking ceremony' to expand the Queen Heo Memorial Park Project in Ayodhya.

GURUDWARA SRI BRAHMA KUND SAHIB

Located a few hundred metres east of Ram Janmabhoomi, lies the historically significant Brahmakund Gurudwara. This site is believed to be the very place where the Chimtadhari Saint Vaishnavadas invited Guru Gobind Singhji with his nihang warriors to chalk out a military strategy to overcome the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb's advances. One can still see the weapons of the victorious nihang forces here. The gurudwara is also known to have been visited by Guru Nanak Devji in 1557, and in 1725, Guru Tegh Bahadur visited and meditated for two days straight.

Valmiki Bhawan is a must-see

VALMIKI BHAWAN

The sage Valmiki immortalised the narrative of Shree Ram's life and times in his great epic, the Ramayana. The marble walls at the Valmiki Bhawan, another spot popular with devotees and tourists alike, are inscribed with shlokas of the story of the Ramayana as described by the sage.

GHATS & KUNDS

RAM KI PAIRI/NAYA GHATS

As the sun dips below the horizon and the fleeting colours of dusk begin to fade away, floodlights fill the scene and the evening aarti commences. This mesmerising view from the banks of the Saryu River can be enjoyed best from the Ram ki Pairi ghat. Technically a flight of steps on the Naya Ghat, the divine charm of Ayodhya washes over the devotees taking a dip in the holy waters. The story goes that one day Lakshmana wished to embark on a pilgrimage, so Shree Ram showed him the lila on the banks of the Saryu. He said that pilgrims arrive here every day before sunrise to take a dip, and that taking a bath in the river would be akin to bathing in all the pilgrimages. Pilgrims to this day carry on that ancient tradition when they take the ritual bath in the Saryu River.

The structure has seen renovation work recently and the road leading to the 25 ghats has also been constructed afresh. The capacity of the reservoir in front of the Ram ki Pairi has also been expanded. The best time to view the ghat is during sunrise and sunset. You can take a boat ride during the evening and feast on chaat sold in street stalls close to the river.

RAM GHAT/SWARG DWAR

Literally translating to 'gates of heaven', Swarg Dwar is an important bathing ghat rooted in Hindu mythology. Shree Ram's remains are said to be cremated in the narrow stretch of land between Sahastradhara to the Nageshwarnath temple called Swarg Dwar. The Ram Ghat is set on the banks of the Saryu River and faces the 18th-century buildings on the river bank, which were built by Naval Rai, a luminary in the court of Nawab Safdarjung. With the river shifted northwards, new ghats had to be deployed for the pilgrims. In the 1960s, the current ghats were built beside the new bridge, which offers great views of the ancient buildings.

SARYU GHAT

The Saryu River is the lifeblood of Ayodhya city as all roads lead back to it. The ancient river makes its way through the states of Uttarakhand and Uttar Pradesh, and finds mentions in Indian epics. Bathing in the Saryu River is akin to going on a pilgrimage as this is the spot that Lord Rama and his family used to frequent. The ghat brims with overflow water in the rainy season and returns to normal during the winters.

The famous steps of Ram ki Pairi

Tourists and pilgrims throng the banks of the Saryu at sunset

GUPTAR GHAT

Anyone familiar with the Ramayana knows that after the completion of his worldly duties, Ram, supposed to be an incarnation of Vishnuji, walked into the river Sarayu for *jal samadhi*. The Guptar Ghat (guptar meaning hidden) is where this is believed to have happened.

This ghat is highly revered by Hindus as this was the holy place where Shree Ram took jal samadhi and left for his heavenly abode of Vaikunth. But his final departure was a difficult decision as his faithful aide Hanuman would not leave his side. He had to resort to trickery as it was imperative that Vishnuji ended his avatar as Ram, thereby leaving the Treta Yug, and resume another form. Shree Ram threw his ring into a crack in the earth and asked Hanuman to fetch it for him. But this was no ordinary crack as it led straight to Nag Lok, where the serpent king Vasuki showed him a pile of rings which looked exactly like Shree Ram's. This is when Hanuman realised he would never be able to see his beloved companion again, because clearly Vishnuji had done this several times in the past and he needed to exit this avatar before reincarnating. The Guptar Ghat presents a picturesque view accentuated by the sepia-toned charm of its ancient temples. The riverside complex is comprised of a bunch of well-maintained ghats and temples, all built by Raja Darshan Singh in the early 19th century. Adjoining Guptar Ghat is Company Garden, known colloquially as Guptar Ghat Garden. The serene environs of the botanical garden are some distance away from the hustle and bustle of the city and are a must-see.

PANCHMUKHI MAHADEV MANDIR

Situated near the banks of the legendary Guptar Ghat, the Panchmukhi Mahadev Mandir is known to have been established by none other than Shree Ram himself. Recognised as one of the oldest temples in town, a five-faced Shiva idol adorns the main shrine while the other temples of Sitaram, Radhakrishna and Hanuman exist within the temple's premises.

CHAKRA HARJI VISHNU TEMPLE

Prime among the temples close to the Guptar Ghat is the Chakra Harji Vishnu Temple. The structure houses idols of a number of deities, including a really old carved idol of Vishnu with a chakra and a pair of imprints which is believed to be Ram's.

The serene atmosphere of the famous Guptar Ghat is a tranquil change from the sounds and sights of the city

JAIN SHRINES

JAIN SHWETAMBAR TEMPLE

It is believed that five tirthankaras were born in Ayodhya, and each of them had different temples dedicated to them. The biggest and most important one is this 200-year-old temple belonging to the Shwetambar sect of Jainism and is dedicated to the first tirthankara, Sri Adhishvar Bhagwan. Many illustrious kings and acharyas have paid a visit to this supremely important site. During the period of Alauddin Khilji, this temple is rumoured to have been totally destroyed and rebuilt in later years. Adjacent to the temple, a number of interesting idols and rock inscriptions were found during excavations in the Sahet Mahet area. These are now being preserved in museums at Mathura and Lucknow. The elegant beauty of this temple draws devotees from far and wide. For devout Jain followers, visiting the temple on the fifth day of Paryushan (fast) is considered very auspicious.

PALACES

JANAKI MAHAL

Reach out to your spiritual side by spending a few days close to God, in the heart of Ayodhya. The Janaki Mahal is the epicentre of culture and religion, with a history that goes back thousands of years. It is believed that the mahal used to be just that—an exquisite palace with rich architecture and splendorous décor. In 1947, the temple and its adjoining buildings were constructed by Mohanlal Kejariwal, and to this day, tourists from all over flock to the temple residence to stay while in Ayodhya. The temple campus is neat, clean and well-maintained. A beautifully decorated statue of the goddess Janaki Devi is situated in the sanctum of the temple, which plays host to bhajans and aartis in the evenings. Festivals like Ramnavmi, Sita Vivah Mahotsav and Shravan Jhula are when there is a flurry of activity in the complex and the singing of devotional songs can go on for all hours of the day. The temple was earlier known as the Sita-Ram Var Vivah Kunj, but was later converted into a trust known as the Janaki Mahal Trust which takes care of the premises today.

Left: *The Jain Shwetambar Temple*
Facing page: *The vibrant exteriors of Janaki Mahal*

Ramrekha Mandir near Makhaura Dham in Amorha Khas

AROUND AYODHYA

MAKHAURA DHAM

An underexplored but important historical landmark with deep mythological significance, the Makhaura Dham lies less than an hour's drive away from Ayodhya, in Basti district's Harraiya tehsil. Raja Dashratha, advised by rishi Vashishtha, is said to have carried out the *putreshti yajna* here along with his son-in-law, sage Rishyasringa, which resulted in his queens Kaushalya, Sumitra and Kaikeyi giving birth to princes Ram, Lakshman, Bharat and Shatrughan.

There are two temples for Ram Janaki here, and another Ram temple is currently being constructed in the shrine premises. Makhaura Dham, along with the nearby Ramrekha Temple, is where the renowned Chaurasi Kos ki Yatra begins. The Ramrekha Temple is believed to have served as a resting place for the attendees of the vivaah of Shree Ram and Sitaji. As the co-travellers grew weary and thirsty, Shree Ram is said to have slaked their thirst by creating a line by shooting an arrow into the ground. The line in the ground yielded a divine water body known as the river Ramrekha and the place came to be known as the Ramrekha Teerth.

The highly revered Dashrath Samadhi temple at Bilvaharighat

DASHRATH SAMADHI

As the name indicates, this is the site where Shree Ram's father, Raja Dashrath, was cremated, and a temple was built as a memorial to him, in Bilvaharighat. Visitors can look at and pay their respects before the statues of not only Dashrath, Bharat and Shatrughan, but also rishi Vashishtha. Dashrath Samadhi is planned to undergo a thorough revamp in the near future.

The Ram ki Pairi offers plenty of space and walkways to explore Ayodhya's history

Walks and Parikramas

CIRCUMAMBULATIONS OF FAITH

BY KARAN KAUSHIK

MOKSHDAYNI WALK

This heritage walk takes you through narrow alleys dotted with traditional akhadas and introduces you to the many temples tucked away in the small nooks and crannies of Ayodhya. The walk serves as a great way to explore the picturesque ghats of the sacred town and acquaint yourself with the unparalleled monumental and spiritual heritage of Ayodhya. Offered as part of a day trip, the walk allows you to soak in the serenity of life lived by the Saryu.

The walk not only introduces visitors with the mystic tales surrounding the temple town of Ayodhya but also takes them to the Nageshwarnath Temple called Swarg Dwar. The Ram Ghat is set on the banks of the Saryu River and faces the 18th-century buildings on the riverbank, which were built by Naval Rai, a luminary in the court of Nawab Safdarjung. With the river shifted northwards, new ghats had to be deployed for the pilgrims. In the 1960s, the current ghats were built, a crucial part of the venerable history of the birthplace of Shree Ram. During the walk, you'll discover that every house, ghat and temple in Ayodhya has a story attached to it. From the Jhunki Ghat, which is named after a true devotee of Goddess Sita to the Sahastradhara, that is believed to take away the lives of wrongdoers who swear by the name of river Saryu in their defence, you'll be amazed by the myriad tales that surround this little temple town.

The walk begins from the most popular temple of Ayodhya—the Hanuman Garhi. This is believed to be the place where Hanumanji used to watch over Ayodhya on the orders of Shree Ram. Pilgrims flocking to Ayodhya usually

Devotees going around the Hanuman Garhi Temple

start their day with a visit to Hanuman Garhi, as it is believed that before seeking blessings from Shree Ram, one must pay obeisance to his dutiful bhakt Pavan Putra Hanuman. The walk then takes you through the iconic Kanak Bhawan, where the idols of Shree Ram and his wife Sita can be seen adorning crowns made of gold. When done seeking blessings from the divine couple, the walk proceeds towards other iconic sites like the imposing Kanak Bhawan, the tranquil Rinmochan Ghat and the ever-popular Ram ki Pairi. Legend has it that the Pairi was constructed by Shree Ram when his brother Lakshmana had expressed his desire to visit the four holy tirthas. One of the major highlights of the walk is the visit to the Nageshwarnath Temple. Raised by Prince Kush, one of the two sons of Shree Ram, the shivalinga at this temple is worshipped as one of the 12 jyotirlingas in the country.

The walk then takes you to the Tulsi Smarak Bhawan which stands as an ode to Goswami Tulsidas. The bhawan also houses the Ayodhya Shodh Sansthan, which is a goldmine for those interested in enlightening themselves with deeper insights on Ayodhya and the life and times of Shree Ram. The 2.5-hour-long walk culminates at the Saryu Ghat, where you are joined by a motley crowd to witness the grand spectacle that the Saryu Aarti is.

PARIKRAMAS

Parikramas are an integral part of the spiritual lives of Hindus. It is believed that taking a parikrama can rid devotees of their sins and even make all their wishes come true. The importance of Parikramas for Hindus could be understood by a legend related to Lord Shiva's consort goddess Parvati. It is believed that, once upon a time, the goddess ordered her sons Kartikeya and Ganesha to circumambulate the universe to enlighten themselves with worldly knowledge. Hearing her orders, while the elder son Kartikeya kept travelling around the world for decades, Ganesha played it smart and walked a full circle around both of his parents. When confronted with a justification, Ganesha said that his world was contained within the body of his mother. The importance of taking a parikrama by Hindus can be justified by this interesting legend. Ayodhya is perhaps one of the most important places in northern India where pilgrims arrive in droves to undertake these sacred circumambulations. Parikramas can be classified on the basis of their duration.

ANTARGRAHI PARIKRAMA

This is the shortest parikrama in Ayodhya and needs to be completed within a day. The devotees begin this parikrama by taking a holy dip in the waters of the river Saryu. The Nageshwarnath Temple is the commencing point of the Antargrahi Parikrama, after which the devotees pass through the Ram Ghat, Sita Kund, Mani Parvat and Brahma Kund. The parikrama ends at the Kanak Bhawan, where the devotees seek blessings from Shree Ram and Goddess Sita.

PANCHKOSHI PARIKRAMA

Possibly the most popular of them all, the Panchkoshi Parikrama is spread across a distance of 16km. This parikrama begins from Chakratirtha and then takes devotees through the Naya Ghat, Ram Ghat, Saryu Bagh, Holkar-ka-pura, Dashrath Kund, Jogiana, Ranopali, Jalpa Nala and Mahtabagh. The devotees stop at every destination and pay homage to their beloved deities. The parikrama draws lakhs of devotees and thousands of saints, who arrive here from cities like Prayagraj, Haridwar, Mathura and Varanasi. The best time to undertake this parikrama is on the occasion of Devuthaani Gyaaras in the Hindu calendar month of Kartik. The Uttar Pradesh government is working towards revamping the Panchkoshi Parikrama circuit.

CHAURASI KOSHI PARIKRAMA

According to Hinduism, there are 84 lakh species that the soul can be transferred into after death. This parikrama is taken to get rid of the circle of life and death by walking a distance of 84km. The Chaurasi Koshi Parikrama begins on Ram Navami in the Chaitra month of the Hindu calendar and is the most challenging of all parikramas taken by Hindus.

The many temples and historic structures form the highlights of the aerial views of Ayodhya

Pilgrims in the courtyard of the Kanak Bhawan Temple

Cuisine of Ayodhya

BY KARAN KAUSHIK

Any religious sojourn in India is incomplete without savouring the popular local delicacies of that region. Ayodhya, too, like the other holy cities in Uttar Pradesh, offer a range of mouthwatering North Indian specialities. From the crunchy chaat to spicy kachoris and oh-so-delicious laddoos, you'll be spoilt for choice during your exploration of the sacred town of Ayodhya. Be it enjoying street food or be it fine dining at upmarket restaurants, the city is a sheer delight for every foodie, especially vegetarians. Rabri, the popular north Indian offering prepared by thickening milk and garnished with loads of dry fruits, is an absolute must-try in Ayodhya. For lunch and dinner, most of the food joints in the city serve the wholesome North Indian vegetarian thali, which includes an array of lip-smacking dishes. If snacking is on your mind, go for the divine Dahi Vadas, which blend the taste of mint and tomato chutneys with fried vadas dipped in fresh curd. These are primarily tangy in taste, thanks to the sprinkling of chaat masala, black salt, cumin seeds powder and other spices. Then there's the popular veg biryani of Ayodhya. Prepared with fresh vegetables, rice and loads of aromatic spices, the dish makes for a flavoursome meal.

Facing page: *A boondi-seller works his magic at his stall in Ayodhya*
This page (clockwise): *Sizzling aloo tikki, a ubiquitous north Indian snack; crisp jalebis; rabri, the quintessential milk-based dessert; kachoris being fried at a stall; and besan ke laddu, which are great both as mithai and prasad*

Right & Facing page:
Descended from the Gods: The fervour and vigour of Ram Leela knows no bounds

Fairs And Festivals

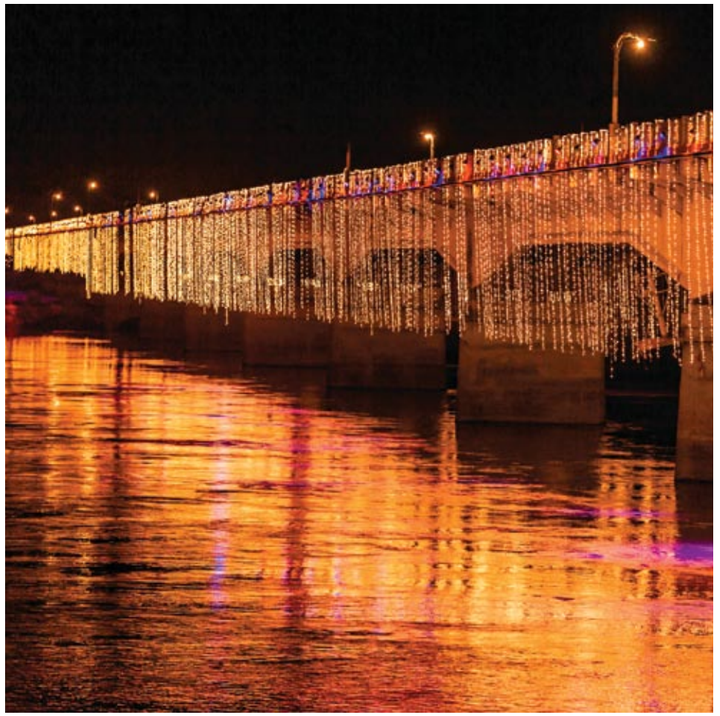
BY PRANNAY PATHAK

The birthplace of the Hindu god-king Ram, Ayodhya isn't just a city of profound religious significance—it is a cultural, spiritual and literary cauldron that stays soaked in festive fervour. Devotees and travellers from far and wide participate in a year-long array of celebrations and merry fairs and congregations that coincide with the arrival of seasons and with mythological events, primarily those associated with the Ramayana. Here's a closer look:

RAM LEELA

Few folk theatre styles can parallel the appeal of a traditional Ram Leela performance. These productions are held all over northern India in the 10 days that lead up to Dussehra, and in some parts, may even go up to a month, for instance, in the Ramnagar version. Unlike elsewhere, the enactment of the epic here takes place round the year, and performing troupes are chosen from all over the country. The lineup of the Ram Leelas that have been held here include a multi-country production from New Delhi's Shriram Kala Kendra, a puppet Ram Leela, Odisha's Daspalla Ram Leela, not to forget the Awadhi, Bagheli and Madhubani versions. Called the Anvarat Ram Leela, it was started in 2004 as part of the culture department's Ayodhya Shodh Sansthan. Performances go on from 6pm to 9pm at the research institute's Tulsi Smarak Bhawan, and each troupe performs for 15 days, with the next one taking over right after. Several other Ram Leela productions are held throughout Ayodhya in the buildup to Dussehra during Navratri, and on the occasion of Ram Navami.

The city is decked up in the myriad colours of the rainbow during Ramnavami



Above: *The city of Ayodhya comes alive during Deepawali and there is no place for darkness here*
Facing page: *Light it up: Deepotsav brings the inner creativity out in this stunningly creative exhibit, paying homage to Shree Ram and his family*

Let the light guide the God home

KARTIK POORNIMA

The river Saryu has been the city's close companion for ages, forever witnessing life unfolding within its bounds. It's where Ram and Lakshmana are said to have bathed as children and also where the two ended their earthly tenures.

On the occasion of Kartik Poornima, the full-moon day of the holy month of Kartik in the Hindu calendar, the Saryu comes alive with earthen lamps and offerings made by devotees pouring in from far and wide. The festival is also known as Dev Deepawali, meaning the Deepawali of the gods. In Hindu mythology, Kartik Poornima also marks the day when Lord Shiva slayed the demon Tripurasura, and Vishnuji took on the Matsya avatar.

Often, devotees arrive in the city a month in advance, and on the day of the Poornima, flock to Ram ki Pairi, Naya Ghat and Guptar Ghat, braving the early winter chill, to take holy dips in the Saryu. As dusk falls, they make offerings of earthen lamps at temples and the riverbank, in a ritual known as Deepdaan. The whole of Ayodhya reverberates with chants of 'Sita Ram, Sita Ram', and celebration tinges the air.

RAM NAVAMI

This is observed on the ninth day of Chaitra Navratri in the month of April, and draws hordes of devotees from far and wide to Ayodhya. Ram Navami, which marks the birth of Ram as the prince of Ayodhya, is one of Hinduism's most special festivals, and here in Ram Janmabhoomi, it attains another level altogether, as the temples are decked up for the city-wide mela.

In addition to the Ram Leela, Ram Navami features a special procession of saints and seers, known as Ramkot ki Parikrama. Badhaiya singing in temples such as Kanak Bhawan are worth witnessing, and so is the congregation of devotees at the ghats, waiting to take a dip in the holy Saryu. Conch shells resound throughout the city and devotees sing and dance joyously.

SHRAVAN JHULA MELA

The Shravan Jhula Mela is in line with the popular Indian tradition of jhula daalna, or setting up a swing. As a newly-wed bride, Sitaji is said to have chosen to visit Mani Parvat instead of her maternal house in Janakpur, to celebrate Shravan.

The 15-day fair is generally held during the months of July-August (during the Hindu month of Shravan) at a 65-ft-high hillock called Mani Parvat. According to the Ramayana, this place was formed from a piece that fell off from the Sanjeevani hill that Hanumanji is famously recounted as carrying all the way to Lanka to revive Lakshmana, after he is rendered unconscious by a near-fatal blow from Meghnad.

On the second day of the fair, images of Ram, Lakshmana and Sitaji are placed in swings suspended from tree branches and made to swing. They are later brought back to the temples, with a huge procession. In Ayodhya, the carnival continues for the entirety of the fortnight—jhulas in homes and temples rock merrily. Dance and music performances become the order of the day, and readings of the works of the poet Tulsidas, fill the streets swarming with devotees and tourists.

RAMAYANA MELA

This unique, one-of-a-kind fair, was conceptualised by the socialist leader Dr Ram Manohar Lohia as a part of a bigger initiative to foster the several available versions of the epic. The fair is organised on the banks of the Saryu, in the Ramkatha Park, on Ram Vivah—the day marking the wedding of Shree Ram and Sitaji. For four days, the city hums with the sights and sounds of folk dance, drama and music performances, poetry recitation and other activities, as religious leaders, saints, scholars and the like congregate on a common platform.

The mela, which once featured internationally renowned artists and performing arts exponents, fell into neglect in the recent past, but development and funding have been planned to put it back into contention as one of the country's most sought-after cultural festivals. Watch out for the Indonesian and Thai Ram Leelas (and also puppet versions) that are often staged here.

AYODHYA DEEPOTSAV

The Ayodhya Deepotsav, started in 2017, is probably the grandest celebration one will witness not just in the city but in the whole country. On the occasion of Deepawali, devotees—both residents and tourists—erupt in a joyous celebration. Artistes dressed as Shree Ram, Sitaji and Lakshmana descend via a helicopter (symbolic of the Pushpak Viman) at a grand Ramkatha Park. The Saryu bank witnesses a grand aarti and is illuminated with colorful lighting and lakhs of diyas—the 2020 edition of the grand festival saw 6,06,569 earthen lamps lit at the Ram ki Pairi, a Guinness Book World Record.

Photo Credits

Cover Design
DEEPAK SURI

Front Cover image
ASHISH RAMESH
Deepotsav 2019

Inside the book
ASHISH RAMESH
Pg 4-5, Ghats lit up in Ayodhya
Pg 14-15, Aerial view of the Ayodhya Deepotsav
Pg 31, A sage reading the Ramcharitmanas
Pg 42-43, Music is a very powerful binding tool when it comes to religious gatherings
Pg 45, A Ram Leela performance in progress during the Ayodhya Deepotsav
Pg 52-53, Old structures, new lives: An interesting street in Ayodhya
Pg 60-61, A park close to Ram ki Pairi with the popular Rama and Hanuman statues installed recently
Pg 84-85, Tourists and pilgrims throng the banks of the Saryu at sunset
Pg 88, The Jain Shwetambar Temple
Pg 89,The vibrant exteriors of Janaki Mahal
Pg 101: bottom left: besan ke laddu, which are great both as mithai and prasad
Pg102, 103: right & facing page: Descended from the Gods: The fervour and vigour of Ram Leela knows no bounds
Pg104-105, The city is decked up in the myriad colours of the rainbow during Ramnavami
Pg106-107, Above: The city of Ayodhya comes alive during Deepawali and there is no place for darkness here; Facing page: Light it up: Deepotsav brings the inner creativity out in this stunningly creative exhibit, paying homage to Shree Ram and his family
Pg108, Let the light guide the God home

ATHUL PRASAD
Pg26-27, Left: Feeling blessed in holy Ayodhya; Above: No one goes hungry in Shree Ram's land
Pg28-29, Facing page: A temple thronged by devotees; Above: A symbol of divinity, and a holy man
Pg 40, Boys dive into the holy waters of the Saryu
Pg 57, The stately Raj Sadan palace
Pg 64,The colourful and intricate interiors of Hanumangarhi
Pg 65, An imposing doorway at one of the ghats on the Saryu
Pg 70-71, Another view of the Kanak Bhawan, showcasing the beautiful arches
Pg 72-73, An aerial view of the majestic exterior of Kanak Bhawan
Pg 76-77, The colourful and profusely detailed interiors of Dasharatha Mahal
Pg 80-81, Valmiki Bhawan

LALIT RAJORA
Pg 8-9,The tranquil ghats of the Saryu River ooze with spirituality
Pg 10-11, The sprawl of the city, with the striking Hanuman Garhi complex at its centre
Pg 16, The idol depicting Ramlala seated on his throne
Pg 18-19, A panoramic view of the Ram ki Pairi series of ghats
Pg 22-23, The Raj Dwar Mandir
Pg 32-33, The grand Guptar Ghat by the banks of the Saryu
Pg 34-35, An ascetic meditates at a pier-like platform across the Saryu, at Ram-ki-Pairi
Pg 36-37, The Saryu gleams with neon lights projected over the Ram-ki-Pairi temples
Pg 38-39,The nighttime aarti at the Saryu banks
Pg 54-55, The sprawling ghats of the Saryu
Pg 58-59,The colours of divinity—red and yellow—on the exterior of the Birla Mandir, are complemented well by the surrounding greenery
Pg 66-67, The bright façade of Kanak Bhawan
Pg 68-69, The patterned courtyard of Kanak Bhawan Temple
Pg 74-75, The rich colours of grand old Dasharatha Mahal
Pg 86-87, The serene atmosphere of the famous Guptar Ghat is a tranquil change from the sounds and sights of the city
Pg 96-97, The many temples and historic structures form the highlights of the aerial views of Ayodhya

SHUTTERSTOCK
Pg 2-3, Holy dip in the Saryu
Pg 13, Architectural details at Hanumangarhi
Pg 20-21, A scenic view of the Ram ki Pairi
Pg-25, A beautiful temple silhouetted against a glorious vermillion sunset
Pg 47, The Prambanan Temple in Yogyakarta, Indonesia
Pg 50, Shree Ram and Sitaji fly back to Ayodhya in the Pushpak Vimaan after Ravana's defeat and the completion of their vanvaas
Pg 56, The venerable Ram-ki-Pairi, seen through an arch
Pg 62-63, The vibrant and imposing exterior of the Hanumangarhi Temple in Ayodhya
Pg 78, Beautiful stone carvings
Pg 82-83, The famous steps of Ram ki Pairi
Pg 94-95, Devotees going around the Hanuman Garhi Temple
Pg 98-99, Pilgrims in the courtyard of the Kanak Bhawan Temple
Pg 100, A boondi-seller works his magic at his stall in Ayodhya
Pg 101: top 3 & bottom right: Sizzling aloo tikki, a ubiquitous north Indian snack; crisp jalebis; rabri, the quintessential milk-based dessert; kachoris being fried at a stall.

ALAMY/INDIA PICTURE
Pg 12, Raja Ravi Varma's painting depicting the Bharat Milaap episode
Pg 48-49, Shree Yogi Adityanath, Hon'ble CM Uttar Pradesh, welcomes artistes dressed as Shree Ram, Sitaji and Lakshmana during the Deepotsav in Ayodhya
Pg 92-93, The Ram ki Pairi offers plenty of space and walkways to explore Ayodhya's history

Uttar Pradesh

UP nahi dekha to India nahi dekha

/UttarPradeshTourism /uptoursmgov / UttarPradeshTourism /UttarPradeshTourism