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The fascinating city of Ayodhya

Kings from the Suryavanshi (solar) dynasty rule from their capital city of Ayodhya.

Ayodhya has spacious roads laid in an orderly fashion. The crossroads and town squares are well maintained. The beautiful city has ponds with lotuses. Its gardens have various flowering and fruit-laden trees.

Ayodhya's innumerable divine temples are well-decorated and resonate with the sound of Vedic chants. Ayodhya is inhabited by the learned Brahmana-s (ब्राह्मण, brāhmaṇa) as well as talented artisans. There are theatres, golden-arched gateways, and tall palaces. Some homes are 3 and 7-storied tall.

The citizens of Ayodhya are clean and well-dressed. They are of excellent character, speak with politeness, and eat fresh food.

Ayodhya is situated on the banks of River Sarayu, whose source is the holy Manasarovara Lake. The banks of River Sarayu abound with chirping birds and bees humming. Ayodhya is surrounded by a deep moat and protected on all sides with fortified walls having many fiery shataghni missiles. It is well guarded by brave Kshatriya-s (warriors). Ayodhya is unconquerable as per

its name. After all, it is a city built by the first human king, Manu himself.

Nemi acquires the name, Dasharatha

The Suryavanshi (solar) dynasty included stalwarts like Manu, Ikshvaku, Kakutsa, Dhundumara, Mandhata, Harishachandra, Sagara, Bhagiratha, Dileepa, and Raghu.

In that illustrious Raghuvanshi lineage, the brave Nemi is born. Deva-s (देव, deva), the demigods call him for help in their fight against their Asura (असुर, asura) opponents. Nemi agrees to contribute to the cause of Dharma (righteousness). A ferocious Asura named Shambara adopts 10 forms and attacks Nemi from 10 directions, including up and down. Nemi moves his ratha (chariot) in all dasa (10) directions and kills Shambara. Thus, he acquired the name Dasharatha.¹

King Dasharatha performs royal fire rituals called the Ashwamedha yagnya (अश्वमेध यज्ञ, aśwamedha yajña). Thus, he established Vedic Dharma all over the land. The citizens of Ayodhya pass their days in peace and prosperity.²

Shani grants boons to Dasharatha

At one time, the royal astrologers tell Dasharatha that Shanideva (the demigod Saturn) is going to enter Rohini nakshatra (constellation). This will cause a disastrous famine for 12 years. Rishi Vasishtha says that this combination has no remedy. After giving it due thought, Dasharatha decides to risk his life to save his citizens from the severe effects of Shani. The king gathers

his celestial weapons and flies his aerial chariot to fight Shani.

Shani finds this amusing but Dasharatha's intent and valour impresses him. He bestows a boon to him. The selfless king asks that Shani must not pierce Rohini and no famine must last for 12 years. After the demigod agrees, Dasharatha joins his palms in reverence and sings a hymn in Shani's glory. The pleased king of planets grants him another boon. Dasharatha asks that no living being should be distressed.

Shani states that a graha (celestial object) is called so, as it captures a being. Likewise, he only implements people's destinies, so he cannot give such a boon. Shani grants him an alternate boon. Shani states that those who worship him and recite the hymn composed by Dasharatha, would not face any suffering from him. A happy Dasharatha bows to Shani and takes permission to return to Ayodhya.³

Curse of a sage from the Vaishya (merchant) varna

Dasharatha has the amazing ability to fire arrows with accuracy based on shabda bheda (his sense of hearing). Once while hunting in a forest, by accident, he shoots an arrow at Shravana mistaking him for an animal. Shravana's last wish is for Dasharatha to quench the thirst of his old parents.

Dasharatha fetches water and takes it to Shravana's parents. He reveals his crime that he had unknowingly killed their son. The Vaishya (merchant) father and Shudra (service-oriented) mother are grief-stricken. This is because Shravana was an ideal tapasvi (ascetic) child and their only support. Shravana was the dutiful son

who took meticulous care of his aged, blind, and dependent parents. He took them on pilgrimages too.

The aged couple have acquired great religious merits through their tapasya (austerities). Shravana's father says that if he had not admitted his cruel deed, Dasharatha's head would have burst into many pieces. He asks the king to escort them to that fateful location.

There, the sad ascetic remarks that Shravana used to do his yagnya (fire rituals) and sandhya vandana prayers. Sandhya vandana is a ritual worship offered to the 3 goddesses Gayatri, Savitri, and Saraswati. It is performed thrice a day viz. right before dawn, at noon, and a little before dusk. The sequence includes performing pranayama, offering arghya to Surya (the solar demigod), and chanting of the pranava mantra Aum with the Gayatri mantra.

The virtuous son would serve them with utmost devotion. Who will do so now? He then prays for Shravana to leave for the abode of the dead using the northern path. This route is taken by a Vedic scholar, a sannyasi, a yagnya performer, a donor of lands and cows, or one dedicated to the spouse and Guru.

Indra (इंद्र, indra), the king of the demigods soon escorts the pious Shravana to Swarga loka (heaven) in a wonderful vimana (aerial chariot).

This spot is present-day Shravan-kshetra, at the confluence of Rivers Madha and Visui near Ayodhya in Uttar Pradesh state.

On the ground, the old couple performs the last rites of their son and continues to weep. They too leave their bodies and go to heaven. But that is after the sad sage

cursed Dasharatha that his son too will leave him, and he will die pining for his return. He remarked that since Dasharatha killed their ascetic son out of ignorance, the sin of Brahmana hatya would not affect him right away but after some time. That is exactly what was to happen.⁴

Dasharatha's daughter Shanta

Dasharatha has 3 wives viz. Kaushalya (कौशल्या, kauśalyā), Sumitra (सुमित्रा, sumitrā), and Kaikeyi (कैकेयी, kaikeyī). Kaushalya is the daughter of King Sukaushala and Amritaprabha. *She was born at present-day Ghuram near Patiala of Punjab state, as per its local folklore.* The wise Sumitra was a princess of Kashi. Kaikeyi is the daughter of the noble King Ashwapati of Kaikeya. *This region is the present-day Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province in Pakistan.*⁵

Dasharatha has a daughter named Shanta. He gives her for adoption to his friend King Romapada of Anga, as he has no children. The kingdom's capital city is Champa.

Anga is the present-day eastern region of Bihar state. Even today, there is a pre-historic town called Champapuri near Bhagalpur in Bihar state.

Once, out of ignorance, Romapada offends a Brahmana due to which all other priests shun him. As Romapada is without a priest, Indra stops pouring rains in his kingdom. The drought is so terrible that his citizens suffer. Romapada approaches the Brahmana-s for help. One of them suggests that if Rishyashringa (ऋष्यशृंग, ṛṣyaśṛṅga) visits the kingdom, Indra would grant rainfall. This pious Brahmachari (true celibate) has never been with a woman and practices a simple austere lifestyle. They narrate his story.

Rishi Vibhandaka lived in a nearby forest on the banks of a lake. Once, he saw a beautiful Apsara there and his virya (seminal fluid) fell into the waters. A female deer happened to come there and drink that water. She became pregnant and later delivered a child who had the horns of a deer. He was thus named Rishyashringa. He lived with his father in the forest unaware of the outside world.

The ministers of Romapada propose sending a courtesan to bring Rishyashringa but without angering him. Thus, an enchanting female is sent to the forest.

When Vibhandaka is away, she approaches Rishyashringa and engages in small talk. Her beauty fascinates him as he has never seen a maiden before. After she leaves, Vibhandaka returns and asks his son why he is disturbed. The Brahmachari describes the visitor's grace, shyness, gorgeousness, and fragrance. He confesses that his heart is overpowered. Vibhandaka realizes he has seen a woman and cautions him as he is a celibate.

A little later when Vibhandaka is away, she visits again. She lures Rishyashringa to her floating abode which soon sails into the capital city Champa. The yogic prowess of Rishyashringa ensures that his entry causes a heavy downpour. This brings great relief to the drought-hit kingdom.

A gratified Romapada offers the hand of his daughter Shanta to Rishyashringa. He grants his son-in-law many cows, hamlets, and fields, especially on the way from Vibhandaka's abode to Champa. The angered sage comes looking for his son intending to burn down

the city. En route, the cowherds provide the fatigued sage with great hospitality. Upon his enquiry, the cowherds say these riches now belong to Rishyashringa.

When Vibhandaka reaches Champa and sees his son and daughter-in-law, he is pacified. He asks Rishyashringa to return to the ashrama with his wife, after performing what is agreeable to the king. They were to do exactly so.

Rishi Rishyashringa will be a sapta Rishi-s in the next manvantara (era) due to his yogic practices. The accomplished Rishi is currently living at his ashrama.⁶

As per local beliefs, Rishyashringa's hermitages were the present-day locations of:

- *Rishi-kund near Munger, Singheshwar-sthan near Madhepura, and Shringi Rishi dham in Lakhisarai, all in Bihar state*
- *Shringi Rishi temples at Shringverpur and Aurihar near Kashi, both in Uttar Pradesh state*
- *Shringi Rishi ashram from where River Mahanadi originates, in Sihawa in Chhattisgarh state*
- *Sringeri in Karnataka state*
- *Rishi Shringa and Shanta Devi temple at Banjar near Kullu in Himachal Pradesh state*

People of all varna honoured during the yagnya

Dasharatha does not have a son who can take charge of his vast kingdom. Dasharatha asks his kula-guru Rishi Vasishtha for advice. He tells him to perform the Mahalaya shraadh to please his pitru-s (departed ancestors). The rituals include the pinda daana offerings to keep our pitru-s free from hunger and thirst. Our offerings do reach our pitru-s like a calf finds her mother amidst many other cows.

When we make an electronic money transfer, doesn't the amount get deposited in a faraway bank account without any physical contact?

After the king does the shraadhha, Vasishtha recommends him to worship Goddess Kamakshi in Kanchi. *Even today, her temple is in present-day Kanchipuram in Tamil Nadu state.* In Kanchi, Dasharatha worships the goddess with great devotion. She appears and blesses him to have 4 sons. The gratified king returns to Ayodhya.

Dasharatha decides to perform a putreshti yagnya under the expert guidance of Rishi Rishyashringa. He invites dignitaries like the kings of Videha, Kashi, Kaikeya, Anga, Magadha, Sindhu, and Saurashtra. Vasishtha instructs Dasharatha to treat with respect all the attending Brahmana-s, Kshatriya-s, Vaishya-s, and Shudra-s. Vasishtha says actions performed with disrespect or deception do not give any benefits. He makes all the arrangements for the ritual.

The location of the putreshti yagnya at Kshirodaka exists in present-day Ayodhya as Dasharath Mahal.

During that time of the ceremony, the Deva-s (demigods) and Siddha-s (accomplished sages) assemble in the higher realms to receive their share of the yagnya's offerings. They pray to God Vishnu for relief from a wicked Rakshasa (राक्षस, rākṣasa) named Ravana (रावण, rāvaṇa). Rakshasa-s are giant cannibals who know the mysterious art of illusion. Due to God Brahma's boon of invincibility, Ravana terrorizes the Deva-s. The evil Rakshasa also harasses Brahmana-s, kings, and women.

God Vishnu is pleased with the worship of the celestials. He appears in front of the Deva-s and Siddha-s and hears their request. He agrees to take an Avatara on Earth to provide relief and for another relevant reason.

Karma and rebirth

God Vishnu's abode is Vaikuntha whose doorkeepers are Jaya (जय, jaya) and Vijaya (विजय, vijaya). They had become proud due to their important role. With arrogance, they had stopped the entry of the 4 pious Sanat Kumara-s, who are great devotees of God Vishnu. They also made fun of their physical appearances. The Sanat Kumara-s cursed Jaya and Vijaya to be reborn on planet Earth. They begged the Sanat Kumara-s for forgiveness with great sincerity. They were then offered to live 3 lives as God Vishnu's enemies on Earth. In each birth, a Vishnu Avatara would kill them for redemption.

In their 1st rebirth, they were born as Hiranyakashipu (killed by Narasimhavatara) and Hiranyaksha (killed by Varahavatara). Their 2nd rebirth happened as Ravana and Kumbhakarna. Their 3rd rebirth would happen in the future during the epic Mahabharata war as Shishupala and Dantavakra. In their 4th rebirth, they would be redeemed as Jaya and Vijaya.⁷

A blue-skinned Avatara is born

Thus, God Vishnu decides to incarnate on Earth and undergo suffering as a human to provide relief from Ravana. He chooses the radiant King Dasharatha as his father. A divine entity carrying prasada appears from Dasharatha's yagnya kunda. With devotion and courtesy, Dasharatha accepts that offering. He gives half

its part to Kaushalya, a quarter to Sumitra, and 1/8th to Kaikeyi. Finally, he asks Sumitra to drink the remaining part of the drink.⁸

Rama (राम, rāma) is the eldest son born to King Dasharatha and Queen Kaushalya. He has a dark complexion with a skin tone like that of a blue lotus.⁹ Queen Kaikeyi gives birth to Bharata (भरत, bharata). From Queen Sumitra, Lakshmana (लक्ष्मण, lakṣmaṇa) and Shatrughna (शत्रुघ्न, śatrughna) are born. Rama is an Avatara of God Vishnu, and Lakshmana is a manifestation of God Vishnu's serpent Adi Shesha.

Shree Rama Janmabhoomi

Supreme Court of India in the year 2019 CE endorsed the construction of the Shree Rama Janmabhoomi temple in Ayodhya. The 1,045-page judgement mentions the ancient text of Skanda Purana 60 times. Skanda Purana describes with great precision, Ayodhya's many teertha sthala (holy spots) that exist even today including the exact birthplace location of Rama.¹⁰

The court judgement also refers to many reports of the Archaeological Survey of India based on Ground Penetrating Radar. Over 90 detailed excavations discovered over 9 cultural periods before the Mughal period. Hindu motifs found included ancient pillars, brick walls, floors, pottery, ceramics, terracotta, iron knives, glass beads, seals, and coins.

The people of Ayodhya celebrate

With the birth of 4 princes, the people of Ayodhya indulge in great festivities including music and dance.

Dasharatha bestows many gifts to the performers, feeds the citizens, and donates cows to Brahmana-s.

The 4 princes start growing up in Ayodhya. Rama and his 3 brothers learn the basic Vedic scriptures under the guidance of Rishi Vasishtha. Dharma (righteousness) and satya (truth) become their strength. They also became skilled in riding elephants, horses, and chariots. They become accomplished in the art of archery, much to the delight of their father.¹¹

