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Speak Up

AYODHYA: THE PRIMAL CAPITAL OF HUMAN CIVILIZATION – A JAIN PERSPECTIVE

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The antiquity of Ayodhya occupies a central position across the Vedic, Śramanic, and Buddhist intellectual traditions of ancient India. According to Jain texts, Ayodhyā – also known as Sāketa, Sukauśalā, and Vinītā – was an ancient city and the capital of the Kośala region, located in Āryakhaṇḍa, a region of Jambūdvīpa in Jain cosmology.

Jain canonical and puranic texts, including the *Kalpasūtra* (4th Century BCE), *Uttarādhyayanāsūtra* (4th-3rd Century BCE) and Jinasena's *Ādipurāṇa* (7th-9th Century AD), frequently refer to the city as Vinītānagara or Ayodhya, and describe it as remarkably vast, measuring nine *yojanas* (an ancient unit of distance roughly equivalent to several miles) wide and twelve *yojanas* long. The city was established on the banks of the Sarayu River by Indra (a celestial being) for Nābhīrāya, the fourteenth Kulakara (patriarch), and his queen, Marudevī, who were the parents of the first *tīrthaṅkara* Ṛṣabhadeva. Each of the city's names reflects a different aspect of its character. It was called Sukauśalā for being situated in the fertile region of the same name, Vinītā because its people were known for being disciplined and cultured, and Sāketa because of its splendid architecture. According to me, etymologically derived from the Sanskrit verbal root 'yudh' combined with the privative prefix 'a' and feminine suffix 'tāp', the designation 'Ayodhyā' signifies 'that which cannot be conquered by battle' – an attribute reflected physically in its impregnable, well-planned architectural fortifications that rendered it impervious to adversaries. This invincibility transcends mere territorial sovereignty and martial defense and represents the metaphysical conquest over internal passions (*kaṣāyas*), spiritual ignorance, and worldly bondage.



While classical historiography often contextualizes Ayodhya strictly within epic and puranic settings, Jain literature preserves an account of Ayodhya as the primal urban space where human institutional life, material culture, and spiritual self-realization were first systematically organized.

Ayodhya and the Development of Civilization

- **From abundance to work:** Jain tradition describes a transition from *bhogabhūmi*, a time when people could live largely from nature's abundance, to *karmabhūmi*, when people had to work, produce food, and organize society. Ayodhya became an important center of this transition under Nābhirāya and Ṛṣabhadeva.
- **The six essential occupations:** Ṛṣabhadeva is said to have organized society around six key occupations – defense and governance, writing and administration, agriculture, trade, crafts, and education and knowledge.
- **Writing, mathematics, and the arts:** Ṛṣabhadeva is also credited with introducing writing and mathematics, teaching the Brāhmī script to his daughter Brāhmī and numerical knowledge to his daughter Sundarī. Jain tradition further associates him with the development of 72 arts for men and 64 arts for women.

Modern archaeological scholarship has drawn direct parallels to this civilizational turning point. Eminent archaeologist H. D. Sankalia noted that within the prehistoric progression of humanity, the era of Ṛṣabhadeva corresponds to the transition into the Neolithic agricultural age – the critical juncture following the hunter-gatherer stone ages when settled cultivation emerged. Thus, Ayodhya emerges as the primordial urban center that first institutionalized agrarian economy, specialized labor, and systematic civic coexistence.

The Spiritual Epicenter: Birthplaces of Five Tīrthaṅkaras

In Jainism, places associated with the major events in a *tīrthaṅkara*'s life – conception, birth, renunciation, enlightenment, and liberation – are considered sacred pilgrimage sites. Ayodhya holds a special place in Jain tradition as the birthplace of five of the twenty-four *tīrthaṅkaras* of the present age:

1. **Ṛṣabhadeva** (First Tīrthaṅkara)
2. **Ajitanātha** (Second Tīrthaṅkara)



3. **Abhinandannātha** (Fourth Tīrthaṅkara)
4. **Sumatinātha** (Fifth Tīrthaṅkara)
5. **Anantanātha** (Fourteenth Tīrthaṅkara)

Following Ṛṣabhadeva's liberation, his eldest son Bharata Cakravartī, the universal monarch, after whom India is traditionally known as Bhāratavarṣa, is said to have established important memorials in Ayodhya. Bharata's legacy also connects Ayodhya with the Ikṣvāku dynasty, an important link between Jain, Vedic, and Epic traditions. According to Jain literature, the dynasty traces its name to Ṛṣabhadeva, who introduced the processing of sugarcane (*ikṣu*) juice to early agricultural society. Jain tradition also holds that, after a fast lasting 13.5 months, Ṛṣabhadeva broke his fast with sugarcane juice at Hastinapur – the event is associated with the origin of the festival of Akṣaya Tṛtīyā.

Ayodhya remained the capital of the Ikṣvāku dynasty for 112 generations. The dynasty is said to have produced most of the *tīrthaṅkaras*, including Ajitanātha, Sumatinātha, and Anantanātha, as well as great rulers such as Rāma, the eighth Balabhadra in Jain tradition. Rāma eventually renounced his worldly life and attained liberation as Muni Padma.

Archaeological and Historical Evidence

Archaeological discoveries and inscriptions provide evidence of the long-standing Jain presence in Ayodhya. These include a 4th-century BCE stone sculpture of a Jina Kevalī found near Hanumānagarhī, as well as coin hoards dating from the 2nd century BCE to the 4th century CE that bear Jain symbols such as the bull (*vr̥ṣabha*), elephant (*hastī*), *svastika*, and *caityavṛkṣa*.

Written and inscriptional evidence also spans many centuries. These records include a 1st-century BCE Sanskrit inscription of King Dhanadeva near the ancient Maniparvat mound, the 14th-century Ayodhyāpurī-Kalpa by Ācārya Jinaprabhasūri, and 17th-century inscriptions bearing *carāṇa-cihna* (sacred footprints). Together, these sources point to a long continuity of Jain worship, monuments, and pilgrimage at Ayodhya's sacred sites.

Historical Continuity and Modern Revival

Despite repeated disruptions over the centuries, including the desecration of the Ādinātha shrine in the late 12th century and later damage during the Mughal period, the Jain community

continued to preserve and reclaim its sacred sites in Kaṭara Mohalla and along the Sarayu riverfront. In the 1990s, Gaṇini Pramukh Aryika Gyanmati Mataji led important efforts to revive Jain heritage in Ayodhya. These included restoring the 31-foot statue of Ṛṣabhadeva at Raiganj, establishing replicas of *samavasaraṇa* (divine assembly) and Trikal Chaubisi (24 *tīrthaṅkaras* of past, present and future) temples, and setting up research institutions. These efforts also helped protect the ancient *caraṇa-cihna* (sacred footprints) at the birthplaces of all five *tīrthaṅkaras*, ensuring the continued preservation of Ayodhya's Jain heritage.

Conclusion

Ayodhya is more than a pilgrimage site associated with a single tradition. From the Jain perspective, it is an important center in the development of human society, where Ṛṣabhadeva is believed to have established agriculture, governance, writing, and ethical ways of living at the beginning of the present era. As the birthplace of five *tīrthaṅkaras*, Ayodhya represents both dimensions of human life: the development of society and the pursuit of spiritual liberation. This rich heritage is also reflected in the deep cultural attachment to the region. As Goswami Tulsidas wrote in *Rāmacaritamānasa*:

janmabhūmi mama purī suhāvani | uttara disi baha sarajū pāvani ||
jā majjana te binahiṃ prayāsā | mama samīpa nara pāvahiṃ bāsā ||

Meaning:

My birthplace is this beautiful city, where the sacred Sarayu flows to the north.

Those who bathe in its holy waters, find a place close to me without effort.