THE RISE OF AYODHYĀ AS A PLACE OF PILGRIMAGE

1. ANCIENT HISTORY OF AYODHYĀ

This paper will attempt to trace the development of an ancient city into an important centre of pilgrimage. Ayodhyā (U.P.) is a place of most venerable antiquity and is celebrated as one of India's seven holy, i.e. redemption-giving cities, yet such factors provide no adequate grounds for the assumption that it has been a centre of pilgrimage since ancient times.

Sāketa, the name generally given in Buddhist sources to the Ayodhya of Brahmanic literature, was already an important centre of civilised India as early as the sixth century B.C. It is mentioned in the Pāli canon as one of the six greatest cities in the country, and during the Buddha's lifetime was ruled over by Pasenadi (Sanskrit Prasenajit, also the name of a monarch of the Solar dynasty). This king resided in Śrāvastī, which was connected with Sāketa by a main road.

The commentary on the Dhammapada mentions a festival held in Ayodhyā-Sāketa during the reign of Pasenadi. This was an annual event of a profane nature called the Vivaṭanakkhatta or 'Public Day'. The young unmarried daughters of the more distinguished families would make their way on foot and unclothed to the river Sarayū, in view of a row of kṣatriya boys and others who each threw a garland of flowers to the one they selected as their beloved.

Ayodhyā-Sāketa was also a city of importance in Jaina tradition. It is mentioned as the birthplace of seven tīrthaṅkara and in the canonical Jambuḍvipaprajñāpatti is stated to be the central point of the land of the Aryans.

Whether Ayodhyā also functioned as an important centre of orthodox religion cannot be ascertained from the sources of these two heterodox traditions. Although it has been assumed that the phenomenon of pilgrimage existed in the time of the Buddha, neither in the Mahābhārata nor in the Rāmāyaṇa is Ayodhyā mentioned as a tīrtha (holy place).

The Rāmāyaṇa of course deals extensively with Ayodhyā as the residence of king Daśaratha and Rāma, but in an entirely secular context. The question of the possible historicity of these legendary monarchs of the Solar lineage must remain outside the scope of this article.

The Uttarakāṇḍa of the Rāmāyaṇa describes how Rāma, followed by all the inhabitants of Ayodhyā, went to the river Sarayū in order to drown himself, together with his subjects, in the hope of assuring a glorious welcome in heaven.

The *Mahābhārata* refers to this mass suicide and mentions Gopratāra, the place 8 km west of Ayodhyā where the drowning occurred, as the only *tīrtha* on the Sarayū.\(^\text{12}\)

The political importance of Ayodhyā continued throughout the period of the Mauryas until at least the reign of the first Śuṅga ruler, Puṣyamitra (c. 187–151 BC).\(^\text{13}\) Under the last Maurya monarch (Bhadrathā), when the empire was already in a state of dissolution, Ayodhyā suffered an attack from the combined forces of Pañcāla and Mathurā, allied, as it seems, with a Bactrian Greek expeditionary force. This siege of the city is known to us from two independent sources, namely the *Yugapuruṇa*\(^\text{14}\) and Patañjali’s commentary on Pāṇini (*arunād yavanaḥ sāketam*).\(^\text{15}\) The most likely date for this *yavana* incursion is perhaps around 190 BC.\(^\text{16}\) The internal disturbances of the Maurya empire may have facilitated the *coup d'état* of the Commander-in-Chief (*senāpati*) Puṣyamitra Śuṅga.\(^\text{17}\) The succession to the throne of the Brahman Puṣyamitra initiated the brahmanical counter-attack on Buddhism.\(^\text{18}\)

The Śuṅgas, however, do not seem to have held sway over Ayodhyā for very long. Numismatic evidence creates the impression that soon after the downfall of the Mauryas Northern India was fragmented into a number of small states and petty kingdoms. Coins found in Ayodhyā give evidence of *Devā* and *Datta* kings,\(^\text{19}\) and the *Yugapuruṇa* speaks of ‘seven kings of Sāketa’.\(^\text{20}\) An inscription found in Ayodhyā states that a king Dhana... (identical to king Dhanadeva of whom also coins have been found?), who considered himself the sixth in descent from Puṣyamitra, founded a building (*ketana*) in the town.\(^\text{21}\)

The kingdom of Ayodhyā was conquered by the invading Kuśāṇas in the first century of the Christian era. A Tibetan source seems to refer to the conquest of Sāketa (*So-ked*) by the Kuśāṇa emperor Kuṇiṣka (*Ka-ni-ka*).\(^\text{22}\)

Under the Gupta rulers Ayodhyā probably reached the zenith of its political importance.\(^\text{23}\) From the time of the great Viṣṇuite emperor Candragupta II we have a description of Ayodhyā by the Chinese pilgrim Fa-Hsien who visited the town in the first decade of the 5th century. Cunningham\(^\text{24}\) and Watters\(^\text{25}\) follow different lines of argument to arrive at the same conclusion that the Sha-chi of Fa-Hsien\(^\text{26}\) corresponds to Sāketa (Ayodhyā). This identification appears to be confirmed in a surprising way by the *Ayodhyāmāhātmya* (Ay. Māh.).\(^\text{27}\) Fa-Hsien relates that when one leaves Ayodhyā (Sha-chi) by the southern gate one comes across a tree, on the eastern side of the road, which has grown from a small stick that the Buddha used for cleaning his teeth. This tree kept on growing despite furious attempts of the Brahmans to cut it down. At the present time, possibly on the same site, is the so-called Dantadhāvanakūṇḍa, mentioned in the Ay.Māh.,\(^\text{28}\) as the place where Rāma used to clean his teeth. Even today it still attracts Buddhist pilgrims, and from what the local *pandits* say it appears that the place is regarded