

Reviewing Aesthetics and Cultural Memory through the Ramā Mandir in Ayodhyā: A Discursive Study

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Abstract

The ever-present dialectic of acceptance and denial of the layered motives behind the creation of monuments and architectural pieces has troubled the socio-cultural fabric of the Indian subcontinent. Recent years have witnessed the resounding triumph of the public memory and bureaucratic efficiency, resulting in the historic decisions on Ramā Mandir, Ayodhyā, Uttar Pradesh. The paper discusses how the temple structure has managed to leap beyond its traditional roles and redefine the cultural synergy of the cities. The paper engages in a conversation on authenticity, materiality, and cultural contexts of the art forms employed in the construction of the Ramā Mandir. It tackles the idea of cultural revitalization and commemoration of the national past through the design choices and the anticipated impact on the masses. The paper navigates the intricacies of memories, monuments, and the materiality of collective consciousness through diverse research in allied fields, including architecture, social sciences, and political sciences. Relying on their firsthand observations, this paper will employ a descriptive critical approach to study how the sacred, religious space of this temple has transformed the visual culture of the city. Building upon the views of Amita Sinha and other eminent scholars, the paper attempts to consider the position of the visual arts in the process of 'monumentalizing' the temple structure of Ramā Mandir, Ayodhyā, as an anchor of cultural identity.

Keywords: culture, revitalization, Ramā Mandir, sacred space, visual histories, monuments.

Introduction

All nations draw on an array of symbols and images culled from specific, selectively chosen pasts to present visions of national identity and national heritage to both their citizenry and to the broader world (Adams, 2014). At the start of this century, the majority of the Indian populace believed in living through the eternal crises of the world, such as corruption, unemployment, environmental issues, and communal divide, resulting in riots. The world has rushed headlong into a series of issues that have been unsolved since then. In the age of technology and rapid digitalization, states and societies around the world deflected and distracted the common people from the core problems. Attempting to elevate the Indian population from the megrims of the past, this study concentrates on the efforts taken by the nationalist government in India to enable the sentimental values of the society, to rebuild a stronger future, through a systematic development plan in the last few decades. The research is centred around the core conflict of the decade – Ramā Janmabhoomi, Ayodhyā, and the consequent consecration of the temple. Through the lens of Visual Culture Studies, the paper discusses how the temple structure has redefined the notions of national identity along with other allied structures of the field of architecture, urban planning, performance art, and so on.

Architecture is the most public of the arts. They are one of the principal means by which the public realm is materially represented, and for that reason, they are of huge social importance (Rampley, 2022). The architectural arts have always been a tool in the hands of the creators of the socio-cultural structures. It acts as a strong reminder of the narratives and historical discourses that shape societal consciousness. The current decade has witnessed a notable

increase in public sculptures and architectural institutions, in the remembrance of political leaders, prominent personalities, and other distinguished icons, created on a monumental scale. It becomes the need of the hour to examine the intention and impact of such public sculptures and architectural pieces from a visual arts and visual culture viewpoint.

The Rāma Mandir in Ayodhyā, Uttar Pradesh, becomes one such iconic symbol that exudes ethereal energy to the people of the Hindu faith and nationalist patriotism. After more than five centuries of continuous efforts, sacrifices, and ultimate courage, the land of birth of Prabhu Rāma has been rightfully restored to its original purpose. The path to this decision has been anything but smooth. The current study focuses on a singularly remarkable piece of architecture that has proved to be a pivotal point in the struggles and efforts of several generations. The paper attempts to examine the multi-layered narratives that have been instrumental in the making of the Rāma Mandir in the city of Ayodhyā, Uttar Pradesh. Several layers of meaning can be discerned from the material choices, iconographical choices, and decisions regarding the architectural space of the temple.

Literature Review

Ayodhyā, Rāma, and the Literary Connections

The city of Ayodhyā, in the state of Uttar Pradesh, India, was specified to be the capital of the historical Koshala Kingdom, under the reign of the Ikshvaku dynasty. References from the Jain text *Adi Puṛāṇa*, the Buddhist text *Samyutta-Nikāya*, and others mention the city as ‘Saketa’ and Ayodhyā intermittently. From 5th century CE onwards, it has been consistently addressed as Ayodhyā. It was referred to as Oudh or Awadh during the colonial era of India till the Independence of India in 1947. Reviewing the extant Indian literature, Winternitz, in his seminal volumes, has sufficiently connected the geographical location narrated in the text to the narratives of the text of *Vālmikī Rāmāyana*. (See (Winternitz, 1927))

Addressing the historical significance and context of the city of Ayodhyā, Hans Bakker has delineated abundant details in the texts such as *Ayodhyā Mahātmya*, *VaiṣṇavKhanda* in *Skanda Puṛāṇa*, *AgastyaMahātmya*, and many others. He has been instrumental in pinpointing the geographical and topographical references of Ayodhyā from numerous references found in the Buddhist and Jain texts from the 5th century CE onwards (Bakker, 1986). He examines the codex sections and recessions available in the Bodleian Library at Oxford, collections available at Vrindavan, at the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute in Pune, and at the Asiatic Society, Mumbai. The text aptly talks about the layers of meaning, stories, and contexts that the city holds within itself. It discusses the visual imagery of Ayodhyā in the *Bala Kanda* of *Vālmikī Rāmāyana* and references to *Sapta-Puri* across the Puranic literature. Hans Bakker concentrates his investigation on whether the city of Sāket and Ayodhyā are the same, the differences in their descriptions, and how other cities and landscapes are described in the context of the historical *Rāmāyana*. His book has proven to be instrumental in bringing forth the debates on the multiple layers of narratives to the city. He diligently documents the historicity of the tīrtha surrounding the main temple location in order to pinpoint the location of the city and the *Janmasthan*. He specifies the historic continuity of the locations of *Guptār Ghāt*, *Kanak Bhavan*, *Sītā ki Rasoi*, *Treta kā Thakur*, and many others (Bakker, 1986). Such texts become crucial in understanding the literary references concerning the relationship of Ayodhyā city with the life of Rāma. No matter how much or how little the bards who told Rāma’s story may have actually known about the whole of India, their tale takes place on the great stage of the land itself. Ayodhyā, *Prayāga*, *Chitrakūt*, and *Rāmeshvara* became well-known landmarks on the stage (Eck, 2012). These references allow the readers to gauge the cultural fabric presented in the epic as well as other literature in the form of poems, praise poetry, and so on. Other

authors such as R. G. Bhandarkar, T. A. Gopinath Rao, and G. B. Deglurkar have brought dynamic aspects to the understanding of the biography and iconography of Rāma.

Rāma, the son of King Daśaratha and Queen Kauśalyā, of the region of Kośala, is popularly understood as the seventh incarnation of Viśṇu through the Vaiṣṇavite faith and other widespread mediums of performance across the Indian subcontinent. Rāma is often narrated as a character who transcends the limits of human qualities and exemplifies the ideals of life. He is neither shown to be completely human nor completely divine, with the abilities of miracles and otherworldly acts. Scholars believe that the aspect of divinity in the character is rooted in the later versions of the Rāmāyana, elevating the acts of benevolence, forgiveness, and balance of judgment to a superlative degree. His association with the Daśāvatārs (Ten Incarnations) of Viśṇu has been understood as an obvious continuation of the glorification of the story of Rāma. Gopinath Rao ascertains that it is no wonder that the accounts of Rāma in the later parts of Rāmāyana came to be looked upon as the human incarnation of God (Gopinath Rao, 1914). Through texts like the Viśṇu Purāṇa, Matsya Purāṇa, and Bhāgavata Purāṇa, the identity of Rāma has been reiterated as an incarnation of Lord Viśṇu for maintaining the cosmic balance of the universe and for vanquishing the evil Ravana. Although the original text of the Vālmikī Rāmāyana available to us does not elevate the character of Lord Rāma to the divine presence of an incarnation of Viśṇu, later texts have restated the importance and divinity of the character. The limited introduction to the texts and character of Rāma should be sufficient in laying a rudimentary foundation for the subject to be discussed in the next sections of the paper.

Ayodhyā: the Past and the Present

Situating the character of Rāma and the city in the context of the literature and historicity, this paper will now move on to discuss the events that transpired in the last few decades in Ayodhyā. This section of the paper will briefly delineate the historical progression of this debate and explain the positions of eminent scholars on the debate, as well as its implications on the public memory, cultural memory, and collective consciousness of the nation. Reflecting on the struggle for the Ramā Mandir, the paper attempts to contextualize the need for looking at the issues and how the architecture serves as a crucial node in the recovery of the nation's past and building a glorious future. Rather than concentrating on the intricacies of the arguments regarding the monument, the paper elects to objectively narrate the events that had happened before the construction and limit itself to deliberating on the articulations and observations related to the investigation of 'memory', 'monument', and cultural revitalization.

The struggle for liberating the land of the birth of Lord Rāma has transcended generations and time. In the document presented by Vishva Hindu Parishad to the Government of India on December 23, 1990, the testimonials of historical literature, Mughal records, and British documentation have sufficiently illustrated the historiography of the advance of the controversy over Rāmājanmabhūmi (Presented to the Government of India, 1990). Citing the records of Abu Fazl and Mirza Jan, the document makes the point of highlighting the existence of the Ramā Mandir, supporting their claims and demand for justice. Report of Archaeological excavations conducted by Prof. B. B. Lal and his team through 1975-1980, and the second phase of investigation under the lead of Dr. B. R. Mani in 2003, the existence of a Vaiṣṇav temple structure of 11th-12th century cemented the argument that the Islamic structure stands as a symbol of transgression of the Hindu culture and traditions (Jain, 2017). Through consistent attempts of Vishva Hindu Parishad, Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, and Bharatiya Janata Party, Kārseva, an organized protest rally, in 1990 and 1992, the Islamic structure was demolished, and a temporary worship site with a Rāma-lallā idol was constructed as a place-holder.

Continuing the discussions of the wide scholarship on the subject of Rāmājanmabhūmi, the views of Tapati Guha Thakurta come at a crucial juncture that addresses both parts of the debate. She has tersely put forth the hard facts of the case and condemned the ‘acts of violence’ perpetuated against the Masjid structure by nationalist groups of Vishva Hindu Parishad and Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh. She refers to K. M. Shrimali’s statement that the whole Rāmājanmabhūmi campaign is about invoking a monument “that is not there” to justify the demolition of one that so clearly was there. This particular line becomes crucial in order to situate how the public memory should be preserved, restored, and at times revived. In the early 2000s, Guha-Thakurta sided with the path of unnatural neutrality, maintaining a stance that neither makes a concrete statement about the authenticity of the temple nor condemns the acts of aggression done in the past during Babur’s reign. Through such easy dismissal, the statement inadvertently claims that the public memory should not consider Rāmāyana or Rāmājanmabhūmi as a historical truth. The author asserts Shrimali’s position that it should be referred to as the monument that was never materially present, but was always a part of the mythological stories. This problematic stand of the author has given way to the current discussion that studies the Rāmājanmabhūmi structure as a part of the contemporary cultural fabric of the city and a necessary component of the national history, and not ‘mythology’ or a ‘legend’.

Amongst the continuous skirmishes on the subject, the author has concluded that the city of Ayodhyā continues to figure only as a place racked by communal conflict and violence, the most combustible flash point on the nation’s political map. In the concluding remarks of the chapter, she has stood staunchly on the opinion that the ‘violent’ demolition of the Islamic building and consequent riots will ultimately result in “the erasure of another memory of Muslim iconoclasm by building a new temple as a ‘living symbol of Hindu cultural pride’ ... with even greater pomp and ostentation. (Guha-Thakurta, 2004).” This statement poses a two-part problem – one that demeans the historical memory of Rāmājanmabhūmi and another that paints it in the color of transgressions against the minorities of the country. The nation-state has taken wonderful steps towards removing the colonial baggage and traces from the psyche of the populace, parts of trans-cultural history, and pages of the future curriculum and discourse. The statement in question, published in the book in 2004, helps us understand the attitude of the scholarship to the retrieval of the cultural and historical memories in context with political juxtapositions. Ironically, it often finds itself on the precipice of denying the pro-temple claims, underlining the issues with the supplements of preserving antiquities and historical records as a primary duty of the present. This selectivist attitude in the choice of public memory has been proven redundant by the subsequent judicial decisions regarding the claims for the temple.

Authors such as Meenakshi Jain, Romila Thapar, and other historians have diligently put forth their opinions and observations based on the facts available to them then. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, many lawsuits were filed in the Allahabad High Court, and later in the Supreme Court of India, in conjectures with the original dispute and were resolved in favor of the Hindu claims, agreeing to the ownership of the disputed land by Hindu claimants. The dispute finally concluded in 2019, when the Supreme Court ruled in favor of the claims of the temple structure. Subsequently, Shri Ramā Janmabhoomi Tirtha Kshetra Nyās took the lead in the administration and construction of the current standing temple structure on the land, bought independently by the trust itself. Resolving the communal issues, the Supreme Court also ordered a section of land to be given to the Uttar Pradesh Sunni Waqf Board within the city limits of Ayodhyā as an act of reparation for the demolition of the Islamic structure. The temple began its construction in 2021, was inaugurated in 2024, and was completed in late 2025. As the case stands today, the decision of the Supreme Court has concluded the controversial

debate, instigated by the Leftist historians and scholars, supported by different sections of the political parties. The result has been announced in favor of Rāmājanmabhūmi, and a magnificent temple stands on the land acquired by the Rāmājanmabhūmi Trust. This paper shall not discuss the particulars of the debate further, as it falls outside the current investigation.

This paper now turns to look at the primary enquiry of how an architecture becomes a monument, how a place is transformed into a sacred space, and ultimately, how memories administer the final blow in cementing the collective memory of a culture. Donlyn Lyndon, in his essay ‘The Place of Memory’, succinctly puts forth her argument regarding ‘space’ and ‘place’.

Space becomes memorable in two ways: through formal structures with special coherence or power, and through events that take place rooted in a location – events that happen with such intensity, or are so frequently repeated, that they lend vividness to what surrounds them and invoke our memories of that place. It is the duality of these sources that sometimes makes the designation of “historic” buildings or places puzzling (Trieb, 2009).

Although the essay by Lyndon defines the institutional places around Europe and parts of America, the framework of unravelling the relationship between place, space, memory, and experience of an architecture can be extrapolated to redefine the current understanding of the architectural pieces in India. In the current context, this particular quote allows the paper to contextualize how the religious and cultural understanding of the city has transformed the nature of public memories, paving the way to making a historical, memorable landmark, which is today recognized as Rāma Janmabhoomi Mandir in Ayodhyā. This line of enquiry is addressed by Amita Sinha in her recent publication. She highlights that the place and its memories, including the rituals, performances, olfactory, and tactile experiences of the same, are an integral part of the narratives of the architectural landscape. The collective memory of the city often resides in the smaller, niche practices that shape the ethos, architecture, and culture. Sinha attempts to provide alternative designs to the proposed structure of the temple, integrating the nearby sites of Kanak Bhavan, Sītā ki Rasoi, and Hanumān Garhi. She suggests an innovative approach to reiterate the legendary story of Rāmāyana and all of the contemporary versions. The paper talks about amplifying the existing memory traces of the story through the contemporary urban fabric and its nomenclature. Context-sensitive planning and reinvigorating traces of the memories of ‘vatika’, ‘kund’, ‘kunj’, etc. becomes a central step in her design proposal of the Ayodhyā temple complex. Here, one can easily understand how the nomenclature plays a huge role in defining the shape and form of the architecture itself. Her paper, with a focus on the idea of Reclaiming Rāmājanmabhūmi, gives a comprehensive set of suggestions, referring to the retrieval and recollection of collective memories of Rāma’s deeds (Sinha, 2022). However, the current paper attempts to retrace the architectural plans, experiences of the spaces, and remembered memories to understand the significance and importance of the Ramā Janmabhoomi Mandir as a crucial, central force in the creation of a novel cultural identity of the city of Ayodhyā.

To conclude the review of the relevant literature and schools of thought regarding the construction of the Rāma Mandir, at the current juncture of contemporary discourse on aspects of architecture and public art, this paper asserts that a thorough reading of the architectural choices and dynamics of the monument that is the Rāmājanmabhūmi Mandir, is necessary for understanding the sacred and cultural synergy of the Ayodhyā city.

Research Objectives

The paper primarily aims to understand the cultural significance of the Shri Rāmājanmabhūmi Mandir in Ayodhyā through multiple readings and reviews of the available public data and

documentation. This particular research is a theoretical analysis conducted on the secondary data available through online platforms, journals, and research articles. It takes a straightforward approach to understanding the experiences of the Rāmājanmabhūmi Mandir in the milieu of the broader network of the cultural landscape of the city. It attempts to establish and examine the connection between the popular visual culture and the mainstream iconicity of the temple.

The scope of the current study is a systematic recall of the memory of Ramā Mandir and its reading through visual culture as a theoretical framework, wherein the experiences of the object take precedence over the materiality of the same. This paper discusses the details of the construction, its design, and its impact on the masses. However, due to the limited images of the interior of the temple and its architectural ornamentation available online, this paper limits itself to discussing the visuals easily accessible through the internet. It must be noted that during a personal visit to the temple, photography was not allowed by the temple's policy because of the ongoing construction in the premises.

Research Methodology

The paper adopts a critical approach to the understanding of the politics behind the choice and decisions regarding major temple structures in contemporary times in the Indian sub-continent. It will systematically analyze the design development plans, artistic quotient of the sculptures and idols, and the collective impact of the establishment on the socio-cultural fabric of the city. The paper is a mere theoretical study based on the writings and other primary data acquired and available through the open-access platforms. The study will concentrate on how these monuments have been positioned at the crux of cultural revitalization. The nation-government has effectively attempted to rewrite its national past with a decolonized attitude and a strongly rooted cultural sentiment. In continuation of Sinha's arguments, this paper now examines how architecture shapes the public memories and cultural ethos of a city or a region. Apart from the obvious nature of place-marking and identity-building of the architecture, the structure and its experience by the local population become a huge contributor to elevating the synergy of the city. A significant share of thought and meticulous planning goes into the transformation of a place from just an architectural space into a monument. Here, the obvious difference comes from the reception of a space by the people who experience it. Resultantly, the paper takes up an extensive review of the data from allied streams of academia, such as economics, architecture, social studies, and so on.

From surveying the process of creating schemas and plans of the temple to understanding the impact of the architecture and its place in the contemporary cultural identity of the city of Ayodhyā, this paper traces the historical timeline of the Ramā Mandir liberation struggle and tries to understand the triumph of the public memories through the permanence and monumentality of the architectural piece. The current paper attempts to look at the sculptures, visual fixtures on the façade, and the architectural orientation and urban planning done till 2025, for identifying strong markers of national identity through the structure itself. As it stands today, the temple structure has become a centrifugal force, drawing diverse art forms, public, contemporary, and traditional, to its core, to transform the identity of the city itself. For the sake of such a study, the paper will look at selected public structures that engage and direct the attention of the public towards concentrating on the monumentality of the temple complex.

Research Problem and Hypothesis:

To define a significant issue through the readings of the current literature, this paper shall look toward parallel studies of how choices of public memory intrinsically construct architecture,

and in turn, how memory is sustained and reiterated by the retellings of history through tactile heritage, architecture, and other allied extensive edifices. In the essay ‘The Place of Place in Memory’ by Esther Da Costa Meyers, it is highlighted that the types and archetypes, like many other traces of history embedded in architectural memory, tend to be normative and represent what survives of the Darwinian social struggle recorded by architecture in its codes and buildings (Trieb, 2009). The essay demonstrates a fine point in the situation of Humanization, which can be reinterpreted and applied in the current case study as well. In the case of Shri Rāmājanmabhūmi Mandir, researchers and scholars have not fully explored the multiple layers of meaning and intent that have enabled such a humongous construction. This gap in the readings of the contemporary visual and material culture should be addressed. The current research paper attempts to fulfil this precise need through the critical theoretical frameworks of visual culture studies.

Another statement that aids in underlining the current research problem comes from a text by Robert Nelson and Richard Schiff’s *Critical Terms for Art History*, James Young addresses how monuments propagate the illusion of the common memory. He refers to numerous texts, one that is exceedingly pertinent to the current study by scholars J. Sert and Ferdinand Leger, wherein they declare that monuments are only possible in periods in which a unifying consciousness and a unifying culture exist (Young, 2023). These statements acknowledge the role of public memory in identifying and choosing the ultimate icon of the period, the century, for a certain region, religion, or culture, as a whole. The research problem is not to define whether these choices have been understood either as an act of nationalist aggression by the current government or as an act of political manipulation or appeasement for the masses. The research problem, here, is the fact that despite its causes and background of construction, the structure of the Rāmājanmabhūmi Mandir stands tall as an irreplaceable cultural marker for the city as well as the cultural synergy of the state of Uttar Pradesh. The paper investigates the process of transformation of the city of Ayodhyā in the context of the construction of the temple to better understand the changes in the cultural and sacred landscapes of the city itself.

As Marianne Doezema has already suggested, there is much more to the monument’s performance than its mere style or its school of design. “The public monument”, she writes, “has a responsibility apart from its qualities as a work of art created for the public, and therefore can and should be evaluated in the terms of its capacity to generate human reactions.” (Young, 2023). This particular succinctly situates the condition of the research hypothesis put forth by the current research paper. This paper is inherently a critical analysis of the temple structure and its impact, acceptance, experience, and reactions of the resident public and the tourists pouring over from all over the country, as well as across the globe.

Analysis and Findings: The Idea of Monument: The Bhāratiya Way

The Mandir

Having discussed excessively on the historiography of the land and its dispute, the paper shall now concentrate on the architecture of the temple itself. Chandrakant Sompura, 15th generation of a family that has specialized in temple building activities, was approached by the then chief Ashok Singhal in 1988 to prepare a preliminary design for the Rāma Mandir. The initial plan was modified in 2020 by the Sompuras to integrate different features and refine its structural integrity. As the plan stands constructed today, it is designed in the traditional Nagar architectural style, 161ft tall, 380 ft long, with an east-west orientation, and 250 ft wide. The temple comprises three floors, each 20 ft high, with different sections and sanctum sanctorum of various deities on the second floor. The entire temple structure has been built from stone from the Baansi region in Rajasthan, granite, and Mirzapur stone for other parts of the plan.

Apart from these facts, several features like an archaeological museum, arches, gallery of images of Ramā Janmabhoomi Mandir are said to be proposed parts of the temple complex.

Here, the paper would like to highlight that the architectural scale of the complex is a direct symbolism of the monumental aspect, which is meant to be experienced and enhanced by the reverence of the devotee. The larger-than-life scale of the temple complex is visible from the farthest of the gates through which the devotees enter the queue for the darshan of Lord Rāma. The slow revelation of the shikharas before seeing the main entrance gate of the temple humbles the viewer and the devotee, increasing the grandeur and experience of the monument. This precise aspect of the design plan has enabled a tremendous wave of overflowing faith in the minds of the devotees as they reach the inner mandapa. This kind of direction of emotions has been used in temple architecture for a long time. However, with the Ramā Mandir of Ayodhyā, the scale and environment add to the experience.

The Murti

The Bālakarāma, consecrated in the garbha grīha of the temple on January 22, 2024, was a result of deep discussions and debates on the subject of iconography and choice of the material. Keeping the story of Rāmayana in mind, the scholars decided that the birth of Rāma should be echoed through the grand idol of depiction of a young Rāma. G. B. Deglurkar, in an interview with a media channel, SaamTV from Pune, remarked that to recap the idea of birthplace as well as resolve the issue of choice of iconography, the age of the idol was chosen to be between the ages of 6-7. This decision centers around the idea of enhancing the image of the temple as well as focusing the attention of Rāma alone. It precludes the questions of a warrior pose or post-coronation ensemble of the four brothers, Maa Sītā, and Lord Hanumān. Other details, such as the absence of kirīṭmukuṭa, a quiver of bows, and necessary iconographical attributes, have been sufficiently explained through the single choice of depicting a young Rāma, who has not yet started his education at Sage Vaśiṣṭha's āshrama, who is looked at as a young prince of the kingdom. Deglurkar further explains that to define the child-like sculpture different from that of any other Vaiśṇavite Gods, the bow and arrow became an essential aspect of the sculpture. Several sources cite that the final idol, consecrated in the temple, sculpted by Arun Yogiraj, was sketched and finalized by Vasudeo Kamath, a senior, eminent artist. Such a multidisciplinary approach to the choice of iconography, design of the sculpture, and execution of the idol has proven to be useful in redefining the idea of young Rāma. This vision has distinguished the temple from all others in matters of design and identity itself. The background details of the idol include 10 avatars of Viṣṇu, other āyudhyas relegated to the deity Viṣṇu, and auspicious signs.

This paper turns its attention to the intricate details seen on the façade of the temple. Most of the work seen on the pillars, windows have been carefully chosen by the team led by Nripendra Mishra, who is the chairman of the construction committee of the Shri Rāmajanmabhūmi Tīrtha Nyās. During various discussions before the consecration of the Rāma Lalla idol in the garbha grīha of the temple, it was brought to attention that the details and critical aspects of the iconography of the main idol were finalized after careful considerations of the stalwarts like Vasudeo Kamath, G. B. Deglurkar, and other eminent artists of the field. Multiple designs and rigorous investigations have brought forth the current design and detailing of the temple. The temple shows striking similarity to the architectural details of the Somnath Temple and is excessively detailed on the façade from all sides. Apart from that, the staircases leading to the

mandapa of the main temple are lined with sculptures of Garuda figures, lions, and elephants. The sculpture of Hanumān at the entrance of the temple can also be noticed to have been done with technological precision. Other details of female figures and guardian figures on the pillars inside all the Mandapas are carved with stellar precision, which almost feels sterile at one point. At this point, the paper argues that despite the resounding success of the gigantic construction of the temple, the sculptural details leave the onlooker wanting more. The paper opines that the pillar details (Fig. 1) are executed with repeated monotony. A similar approach can be observed in other aspects of architectural decoration. Upon careful observation, this can be looked at from the viewpoint of integration of contemporary methods of sculptural practice, technological innovation, and the integration of popular styles and classical subjects of sculptures. To conclude this part of the discussion, the paper states that the temple design and sculptural details succeed in replicating the stylistic orientation of the historical temples, famous for their intricate details on the pillar jambs, windows, etc. Although one should withhold a complete critical judgment that compares the contemporary construction to the historical structures from which it has been inspired.



Figure 1 Pillar details, 2022, Mandapa of the Rāma Mandir, Ayodhyā. (Courtesy: Google Images)

Public Sculptures and other important visual symbols:

Another important aspect of the temple complex is the integration of the surrounding temple structures and landmarks of the city. Places like Kanak Bhavan, Sītā ki Rasoi, Sītā ki Kupi, and other water structures engage the viewer and devotees in rebuilding the historical memories of the city of Rāmayana. Such spaces endeavour to rebuild the broken narratives of the public and attempt to strengthen the cultural consciousness of the city. Designing the landscape around the temple complex becomes equally pertinent in creating and maintaining a cultural synergy between the geography and the demography.

At this juncture, this paper attempts to look at the public sculpture and art forms placed at various places like railway stations, airports, chowks, and streets, to understand the nature of urban planning done in the city of Ayodhyā. Sculptures of Tulsidas, installed on the parkota of the temple structure, and other prominent bhakt and figures of importance in the story of Rāmayana will be installed in due course of the construction of the remaining temple complex; this encapsulates the attempt to remember all editions of the stories and honour each tradition of the epic Rāmayana. At the important infrastructure facilities, crucial art forms and motifs have been reinstated to reinforce the narrative of the epic Rāmayana. Although the paper acknowledges that the ‘artistic’ quotient of these visuals borrows heavily from contemporary, popular practices, their circumstantial importance prepares the viewer to notice other fine

details. To illustrate this particular point, (Fig. 2) and (Fig. 3) show photography from the Ayodhyā Dhām Railway Junction and Maharshi Vālmikī International Airport, Ayodhyā Dhām. Here, the squirrel becomes an important icon that represents that even the smallest effort makes a difference. Even though the material and visual style have no connection whatsoever to the traditional narrations of Rāmāyana, the symbol, the form takes precedence in establishing the connection of the infrastructure facility to the core of the city, i.e., the monument. However, the latter images show a variety of murals exhibited at the airport in the waiting hall and reception area. Adopting a stylistic affinity to the Madhubani paintings, folk arts from different regions of Uttar Pradesh, the murals at the airport explore the expressions of public arts with the subject matter of the epic of Rāmāyana. Here, the material choices of the artworks take a back seat, in comparison to the narrative connections to the story, and in turn to the memories of the past in that particular geography.

Another fascinating piece of urban planning of Ayodhyā is the design choice of the streetlights of Ayodhyā. Streetlights are, by far, the most common denominator of the visual icons that often go unnoticed. Yet they play the role of a silent reminder of the place that we are in. Just like the iconic streetlights of Mumbai, Kolkata, and other metropolitan cities, Ayodhyā has incorporated some simple symbols that reinstate the connection of the passerby to the stories of Rāmāyana and the cumulative identity of the city itself. Figures 4 and 5 show one of the many designs of the

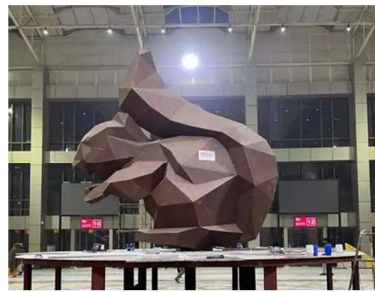


Figure 2 Sculpture of a Squirrel, Ayodhyā Dham Junction, Ayodhyā, artist unknown, Courtesy: Google images

streetlights around the city of Ayodhyā. The paper argues that these sculptures and design elements become important markers of the temple structures themselves. It enhances the visibility of the landmarks near the main temple complex. Also, such design motifs allow the viewer and passerby to connect to the inherent landscape of the city. This recaps the identity of the city, firmly rooted in the culture of Rāmāyana as well as the sacred fīrtha of the Temple. These examples sufficiently illustrate how design and art intermingle to sustain the narrative intended by the planners and makers of the city as well as the temple complex.



Figure 3 Details of Murals, Reception Area of Maharshi Vālmikī International Airport, Ayodhyā Dham. Courtesy: Author



Figure 5 Example of a 'Vaiṣṇav tilak' streetlight decoration/design, Ayodhyā, Courtesy: Anindito Mukherjee, Getty Images.



Figure 4 Example of a 'Gāda' streetlight decoration/design, Ayodhyā, Courtesy: Google images.

Most discussions on monuments ignore the essentially public dimension of their performance, remaining either formally aestheticist or almost piously historical. But in their fusion of public art and popular culture, historical memory and political consequences, monuments demand an alternative critique that goes beyond the questions of high and low art, tastefulness, and vulgarity (Young, 2023). This particular statement underpins the thought of the construction of the Rāma Mandir. The monumental aspect of the structure comes from the inclusion of various reference points and the diversification from the traditional iconographical strictures. The construction and design choices of Shri Rāmājanmabhūmi Mandir walk a fine line of inclusion of traditional and 'popular' art forms, through the choices of urban planning and temple designing. The impact of such decisions can be seen through the overall increase in tourism and changes in the economy of the city.

Several studies on the impact of the temple structure on the urban fabric of Ayodhyā show that the transformation extends beyond the physical infrastructure, as it embodies a vision of prosperity, cultural heritage, and sustainable development (Dixit, 2024). The paper postulates that the last few years have witnessed a complete makeover of the Ayodhyā city. From the era of riots and communal violence, the city is now looked at as a centre of cultural reverberation, celebrating the historical roots, the end of the struggle for liberation of the birthplace of Rāma, and last but not least, rebuilding the memories of the past for a better future. The paper argues that in the making of a grand 'monument' that stands tall as a reminder of the bloodshed and aggression, it becomes an anchor of economic development for the present and future generations. This type of monument maintains its connection to the hard past as well as generates new connections to the present through its presence in the day-to-day activities of

the common people. The relevance of a monument contributes a lot to the making of the identity of the city. It transcended the turmoil of the last decade to create a cohesive environment enabling higher income opportunities and development options. Engagement of crowds through Saryu Aarti, enactments on the days of festivals, and niche traditions of Ramā-Lila plays all add up to the final picture of cultural revitalization. Through the efforts to make the world record of lighting the lamps during the Deepavali, the state government and the relevant authorities continually attempt to strengthen the connections between the masses and the monument. The paper limits its observations to generic statements in connection with its impact of the statistics of the city development, as it falls outside the purview of the current study.

Concluding Remarks

This current paper has attempted to understand the a priori conditions relevant to the major construction of the Shri Rāmājanmabhūmi Mandir through the lenses of visual arts and culture. Through public murals, sculptures, banners, streetlights, details of the windows of the temple, and space-making activities around the complex, the temple structure has collectively commemorated a series of choices and events narrated by the national past and bureaucratic efficiency. At the epicentre of this revolution of memories in the minds of the Indian population lies the systematic construction of various monuments, with the intention of recognizing the silent contributions of the selfless patriots, humble actions of the common people, and ultimately, a culture that vows to reclaim its rightful heritage. This paper examines the act of construction of the Rāma Mandir in Ayodhyā as a literal reclamation of the lost cultural identity of the city. Through the discussions of the brief historiography of the struggle for liberation of the birthplace of Lord Rāma, events and decisions regarding the construction of the temple complex, and understanding of the significance and impact of the temple, the current study concurs that the visual iconography of the epic and newer definitions of monumentality determined by the temple as indeed become an anchor of cultural identity for the city. To summarize, the paper is a humble study of the available visual data of the Shri Rāmājanmabhūmi Mandir in Ayodhyā in the context of redesigning the sacred and cultural landscapes of Ayodhyā.

Suggestions and Future Directions:

One of the interesting aspects of the study that needs to be explored further is a systematic analysis of the designs utilized in the making of the facades of the architecture. Due to a lack of access during the construction phase of the temple, an in-depth study of the influences and stylistic orientation of the temple structure was not possible. However, in the future, major research can be conducted on the lines of understanding the elements of the contemporary version of 'traditional' architectural construction of the temple. Subsequently, the Rāmājanmabhūmi temple can be viewed and studied from the viewpoint of social sciences, cross-referencing the economic studies, bank surveys, and reports to understand the quantitative impact of the temple on tourism and other hospitality industries.

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