

Ayodhya as a Narrative Instrument in Post-1991 Ramayana Retellings

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Abstract:

Rather than reading Ayodhya as the fixed location where the Ramayana plays out, this essay shows how Ayodhya becomes an object that adaptations repurpose to reposition their meanings. It begins not with the post-1991 novel but with Valmiki's Ayodhya: the poet builds the city with gates, walls, granaries, and streets in Canto V of the Balakanda before his tale even begins. Against that background, I read Banker's *Prince of Ayodhya*, Tripathi's *Scion of Ikshvaku*, Joseph's *The Vigil*, and Arni's *The Missing Queen*, tracing how each adapts a shared layout while staying in conversation with it. Using Barthes's naturalisation and Genette's palimpsest, and drawing on media-studies and genre scholarship, I then read the Ayodhya that follows the Ram Mandir's January 2024 consecration as a further instance of the same technique. Across text and city, Ayodhya works as a site of negotiation over political power, memory, and narrative validation.

Keywords: Ayodhya, mythological fiction, narrative space, palimpsest, Ram Mandir, naturalisation.

Introduction

Most accounts of India's mythological fiction boom treat Ayodhya as a setting — somewhere the plot happens, rather than something the plot needs. I want to argue for something closer to the opposite. Across the post-1991 Ramayana retellings that make up the genre's commercial and critical core, Ayodhya does not just hold the story. It does work in the story, and the work changes from author to author in ways that are easy to miss if the city is read as background rather than as argument. A claim like that needs a baseline before it needs a corpus, and I want to start with Valmiki rather than with a theoretical substitute for him.

Ayodhya enters the Ramayana already finished. Canto V of the Balakanda gives it twelve leagues in length and three in width, ramparts, moats, a chessboard grid of streets, granaries, merchants, and a king who guards it the way Indra guards heaven (Griffith, *Bālakāṇḍa*, Canto V). None of this reads as a claim being defended. It reads as a fact about the world the poem happens to be set in, and that is precisely the thing worth tracking forward into four very different modern retellings, each of which inherits the finished city and does a different thing to it. The comparison only works, I think, if Valmiki's version counts as the first term in it rather than as something everyone already knows and can skip past.

The genre these four novels belong to is now well documented. E. Dawson Varughese has mapped the post-millennial rise of English-language "mythology-inspired fiction" from India — what she names "Bharati Fantasy" — as a market phenomenon shaped as much by reader reception as by authorship (Dawson Varughese 1–14). Deimantas Valančiūnas locates the same boom in the social aftermath of the 1991 liberalisation, in a rapidly expanding English-reading middle class and its new appetites for home-grown genre fiction, and reads Amish Tripathi in particular as staging Hindu myth as a modernisable, mass-market worldview (Valančiūnas 191–94). Tabish Khair's earlier account of Indian English "pulp" supplies the commercial lineage this fiction extends (Khair 59–61). What this scholarship establishes is the market and

the ideological temperature of the genre; what it has largely not done is follow any single site across the corpus. In parallel, the scholarship on Ramayana retellings has insisted for decades that the tradition is plural rather than singular — A. K. Ramanujan's account of "three hundred Rāmāyaṇas" made the point canonical (Ramanujan 22–24), and Paula Richman's collections have shown how twentieth-century tellers use the epic to question caste and gender (Richman 1–8), a lineage of oppositional and women's retellings that Nabaneeta Dev Sen traces from folk song into modern print (Dev Sen 18–20). My debt to this body of work is obvious. My departure from it is narrow and deliberate: I read these texts neither for their myth nor their market nor their gender politics alone, but for what each one needs Ayodhya, as a place, to do.

Ashok Banker's Ramayana series opened the genre's post-liberalisation commercial expansion in 2003. It gives Ayodhya an idealised civic body whose violation becomes the series' central image of catastrophe. Amish Tripathi's *Scion of Ikshvaku* (2015) goes the other way, building an explicitly imperfect Ayodhya, a reforming state whose gap between what it wants to be and what it is generates the novel's whole ethical crisis. Sarah Joseph's *The Vigil*, translated into English in 2014, is stranger still — it builds the city from outside, through a Vanara narrator with no stake in its legitimacy, so that Ayodhya's war of rescue turns out, once you look closely, to be a war fought for reputation. Then there is Samhita Arni's *The Missing Queen* (2013), which articulates the loud, roaring whisper: a post-war Ayodhya where wealth is invented, recounted, and marketed, and where the working of the machinery requires the queen's absence. Set against Valmiki and against each other, these four cities trace something like a movement — idealisation, reform, critique, exposure — and that movement has an odd echo in Ayodhya's actual reconstruction since 2024, to which I turn in the final section, where a state-branded "economic renaissance" runs alongside a government investigation into where some of the temple's donated money went.

I should say plainly what this is not. It is not a claim that fiction predicted policy, and I am wary of anyone who reads it that way. The more modest point is that a textual tradition preoccupied for two thousand years, across authors who agree on almost nothing else, with how a city manufactures its own legitimacy, has built up along the way a fairly precise vocabulary for watching that manufacture happen in the world the fiction was written in.

The four novels chosen here are deliberately mismatched in politics as much as in form. Banker writes commercial epic fantasy and shows little patience for institutional critique. Tripathi writes a reformist, law-and-order retelling pitched at a mainstream English-reading middle class — the readership Valančiūnas identifies as the genre's engine (Valančiūnas 192). Joseph writes from an explicitly Dravidian, ecological, feminist position, in Malayalam, arriving in English only through later translation. Arni writes satire aimed at the very media culture that produced this genre. That four writers with so little in common all end up using Ayodhya to test a polity's self-justification is not, I think, an accident. It looks more like a structural requirement of retelling the Ramayana inside a liberalising media economy: the city has to be made to do this, whoever is writing it.

Ayodhya as Naturalised Sign

The reading that follows leans mainly on Roland Barthes's account of myth as a "second-order semiological system," in which a sign already carrying historical and ideological weight gets emptied of that history and handed back to us as natural, self-evident, without an origin (Barthes 114–15). Barthes was writing about wrestling matches and wine advertisements, not epic narrative. However, the model travels well to a genre whose entire business is re-narrating a two-thousand-year-old text for a liberalising, media-saturated readership. What each retelling does with Ayodhya, on this account, is naturalisation: it takes the city's political function — legitimating a ruling house, absorbing violence, turning conquest into peace — and hands it

back as simply what Ayodhya is, rather than as an argument the text happens to be making. The trouble is that Valmiki's Canto V has already done this once, at the level of the founding description itself, so every later retelling is doing it a second time, on top of a surface that was never neutral to start with.

That double layer is why I need a second tool, not just Barthes's. Genette's notion of the palimpsest supplies it. The Ayodhya of each retelling stands as a hypertext upon Valmiki's hypotext. Whatever a subsequent author adds to, tones down, or subverts in the inherited city is itself a readable argument (Genette 5–7). To read Ayodhya as a narrative device is thus to pose two questions at once: what does a text need the city to do for its ethical or political argument to take purchase, and what does that need quietly bury in the process? Taken against Valmiki's twelve-league ring of moat and wall, no city discussed in the sections that follow is made of pure invention; each reworks a description that, in itself, already constitutes an argument for the naturalness of the order it proposes to represent.

Before the Novels: Television and Consecrated Brick

The novels discussed below do not walk into an empty Ayodhya. By the time Banker started publishing in 2003, the city had already been narrated and physically rebuilt twice over, by media that were never literary in the first place — and Barthes's own preferred objects, wrestling matches, wine, advertisements, describe those media better than most literary theory could. The scholarship on this period is unambiguous about the scale of the effect. Arvind Rajagopal's study of Ramanand Sagar's *Ramayan*, broadcast on Doordarshan from January 1987, argues that state television's serialisation of a Hindu epic produced a "split public" and reshaped the political field, feeding directly into the most consequential phase of the Ram Janmabhoomi campaign even as its leaders embraced the very neoliberal opening the serial's audiences imagined they were escaping (Rajagopal 1–10, 72–79). Purnima Mankekar's

ethnography of urban viewership shows how the serial built formations of gendered and religious nationalism that reached well past entertainment and into the texture of household life (Mankekar 165–68). Whatever else it was doing, television had already naturalised Ayodhya as devotional-national space, at a scale no novel discussed here could touch, and it had done so well before any of these novels existed.

The Vishva Hindu Parishad's Ram Shila Pujan campaign, in 1989 and 1990, took that televised image and turned it into something you could hold in your hands. Bricks stamped with "Shri Ram" were manufactured and ritually consecrated across hundreds of thousands of villages, towns, and cities, then carried to Ayodhya in organised processions, often with small cash donations collected along the way (Rajagopal 151–55). What matters here is less the politics of the campaign than its structure. It spread the work of naturalising through millions of small, concrete, local acts, until Ayodhya's claim on the country became less something imposed on people from without and more something built out of their own handiwork, house to house and town to town, until it grew difficult to say where the soil ended and the story began.

This history changes how the readings below should be taken. The novels are not where Ayodhya's life as a narrative instrument starts. They come third, after television had already naturalised the image and a nationwide material campaign had already rehearsed the underlying logic: that a story can absorb participation in the form of small offerings, accumulated toward one site. The reconstruction between 2024 and 2026, which I turn to at the end, is still running on that same logic, just faster and in different words. So reading Ayodhya as a narrative instrument is not really a claim about the novel as a form. It is a claim about what this one site has been made to do for almost four decades, across television, ritual, fiction, and now urban planning.

Valmiki: The City as Finished Fact

Griffith's translation gives Canto V a proper name, "Ayodhyá," and before the story is even allowed to begin, the canto does one thing: it measures the city. "Her walls extend / Twelve measured leagues from end to end, / And three in width from side to side," moated, ramparted, gated at even distances, streets laid out "With chess-board line and even square" (Griffith, *Bālakāṇḍa*, Canto V). Dasharatha does not so much rule this city as live inside its completion, guarding it "As royal Indra, throned on high, / Rules his fair city in the sky." Merchants show up with precious goods. Envoys arrive from distant kings: elephants, chariots, gilded piles round out an inventory that never once has to justify itself. Nothing here is up for debate, because nothing here is presented as a position anyone might take a different view on. The city simply is what the measurements say — and that, on Barthes's account, is naturalisation at its purest: a claim so total it never had to sound like a claim.

This is the hypotext the four modern retellings are writing against, whether or not any of these four authors had Griffith open on the desk. Genette's point about the palimpsest is not that a hypertext has to cite its source. It is that the source's structure keeps operating underneath, visible in whatever the later text keeps, cuts, or flips (Genette 5–7). What Valmiki hands down is a grid — measurements, a king who rules simply by sitting at the centre of an already-finished design. Each retelling here inherits that grid and does the one thing Valmiki's own description had ruled out: it argues. Banker turns the measurement into hospitality and then into a wound. Tripathi turns the completion into an admission that nothing here is actually complete. Joseph will not even let her reader stand inside the measured city. Moreover, Arni takes the gilding on Valmiki's palaces literally and asks, bluntly, where the gold actually came from.

Banker: The City as Body

Banker's Ayodhya is built twice over, the two constructions never quite cohabiting gracefully. In expository mode, it is a paragon of inclusive civic planning: "Ayodhya was not a city that walled out the world; the world was here, within its walls, as much a part of her structure as the river that wound its way literally beneath her greatest buildings" (Banker). The credit is ascribed to Manu, the city's fabled founder, and openness is portrayed as vision — a strange way of phrasing it, since Valmiki's own Manu had done little more than build a grid, dig a moat, and call it a day. Banker's Manu built a philosophy instead. The measurement has quietly turned into a value. This is exactly the commercial-fantasy mode Dawson Varughese describes, in which epic scale and world-building carry an implicit civilisational argument for the reader's consumption (Dawson Varughese 45–49). Barthes would call it naturalisation happening a second time, on top of Valmiki's own: Ayodhya's hospitality gets presented as simply what the city is, an inherited fact of urban planning, not a claim the narrative is making about which kind of polity deserves to survive an epic war.

That openness gets its violent opposite soon enough. When Ayodhya comes under siege, Banker does not write an invasion. He writes an assault on a body: "Ayodhya was being raped" (Banker). It is worth pausing on that sentence, because it does something specific. It borrows the vocabulary the genre elsewhere reserves for women and lays it onto the city itself, so that the city's violation and a woman's violation start to read as the same kind of catastrophe. An idealised civic body whose destruction can license an entire military response is exactly what this plot needs, and the gendering of that image goes completely unremarked by the text. Valmiki's measured city could never have been raped in this sense. It had no body, only dimensions, and a wound the reader actually feels rather than just tallies up was never something an inventory of gates and granaries could give you.

Tripathi: The City as Unfinished Reform

Tripathi's *Ayodhya* works as a narrative instrument in a completely different register: not an idealised body, but an unfinished reform project that his own characters refuse to call a utopia. Arguing with his mother over Ram's decision not to execute a rapist who escaped capital punishment on a technicality, Bharat lays out the novel's whole premise in one line: "Dada lives in a world that should be, not the world as it is. He wants to enforce the values of an ideal society, but he forgets that Ayodhya is not an ideal society. We are very far from it" (Tripathi 133). That line matters because it blocks the exact naturalisation Valmiki's canto and Banker's civic philosophy both perform. Tripathi never lets *Ayodhya* read as self-evidently just. Its injustice gets named, argued over, and turned into the explicit ground of the novel's central crisis — the one set off by the murder of Roshni, an invented character whose death exposes the distance between Ram's legal idealism and what *Ayodhya* can actually protect.

This reformist framing is precisely what the criticism on Tripathi emphasises. Valančiūnas reads his method as a "demythologisation" that recasts gods as fallible, deliberating humans and pitches the result at a middle-class readership hungry for a modern, governable version of tradition (Valančiūnas 195–99). Where that scholarship tends to stop at Tripathi's characters and his politics, the point I want to press is spatial: the reform is legible only because the city carries it. Elsewhere in the same book, falling crime statistics get cited by these same characters as evidence that reform is working. Hence, the city ends up doing double duty as a stage for the limits of institutional reform — real prosperity, but never quite finished, always available as a rebuttal to whoever wants to declare the project done. Valmiki's *Ayodhya* is complete by definition, twelve leagues by three, gates set at even distances. Tripathi inverts that completeness on purpose, though the inversion only registers as deliberate once you put the finished city next to it.

Joseph: The City as Reputation

Sarah Joseph builds Ayodhya from its edge, through Angadan, a Vanara narrator who has no stake in Raman's legitimacy, and the city that comes out of this is disciplinary rather than aspirational. Joseph's Ramayana work belongs to the oppositional, regional, and feminist strand that Richman and Dev Sen document, in which the epic is retold from precisely the positions its mainstream versions silence (Richman 2–6; Dev Sen 19–21); her larger Kerala project of Ramayana retelling, in the plays gathered as *Retelling the Ramayana: Voices from Kerala*, works the same Dravidian and feminist seam (Joseph and Nair vii–xii). The clearest statement of what Ayodhya is, in *The Vigil*, is not a description of the streets at all. It is Raman's own account of his war, delivered to Sita after she returns from Lanka: "I, a person of dharma, had to suffer a bad name. My illustrious clan also acquired a bad reputation. I have done whatever I had to restore it ... Through my valour, I rectified the misfortune inflicted by God. I fought the war to prove it. Not to rescue you" (Joseph 217). That single admission rewrites the whole war as reputation management, not rescue. Its object was the clan's "good name," not the queen. Which means Ayodhya, in this novel, is a device for showing exactly what a kingdom's sense of honour protects, and what it very obviously does not. Sita's own reply — that Raman has thought about nothing but her body and never her mind — pushes the same point further (Joseph 217). Violation becomes reputational injury. Reputational injury becomes war. Somewhere in that chain, justice for the person actually violated just never comes up.

Joseph codifies this by refusing to let the narrative lapse into a purely Ayodhyan history. Angadan is from Kishkindam, not from Ayodhya, and Raman's court means to him no more than the closeness of an ally whose own kingdom would be lost in someone else's war regardless. Ayodhya thus enters the picture only in terms of the pressure it can exert on others — the debts it calls in, the loyalty it extorts, the dharma through which alliance turns into servitude. We get neither Banker's naturalisation of Ayodhya's openness nor Tripathi's

internalised exploration of its anxiety. Joseph denies interiority altogether, and that denial is the point: where Valmiki furnishes his readers with ground to trace their steps through a city, Joseph furnishes hers with a wall to stand outside of — a state discipline that need not offer an account to anyone, especially not the patrons whose war money is buying its victories, and certainly not to any units of measurement.

Arni: The City as Apparatus

Arni's *Missing Queen* takes this whole pattern further than any of the others, mostly because the novel is willing to name the mechanism instead of just running on it. It belongs to the feminist-satirical wing of the retelling tradition Dev Sen describes, where the recovery of the silenced woman's account becomes the whole engine of the retelling (Dev Sen 20–23). Ayodhya's postwar prosperity reaches the reader through a journalist's investigation, and the text does not hedge about where the money came from. After the war, "the golden covering of the domes" of Ravana's palace "was scraped off, smelted into bars and shipped off to Ayodhya to line the pockets of the Ayodhyan populace," while Lanka's dispossessed are left "begging for handouts" in their own streets. The domes themselves get "repainted with gilt ... so that it all looked like it did before" (Arni). A Lankan server says the quiet part to the journalist directly: "it's just gilt that shines like gold. The real gold is in Ayodhya, building up your empire" (Arni). Valmiki's Canto V mentions gilded piles in passing, one item in a long inventory, and moves on without a second thought. Arni stops on that one item and asks the question the inventory was built to avoid — where the gold actually came from, and who is left without it now.

The novel's editor figure lays out the operating logic almost too plainly for fiction: "There are many versions of the same story, all truthful. Which one do we tell? We pick the story that wins, the story that sells, the story that makes us feel good. That's our job" (Arni). The same

man later hands the journalist Ram's line "Democracy begins at home" (Arni) as a quotable proof of progressive governance, even though the reader already knows Sita is not home at all; she is in exile. The cost of all this shows up visually as well, in the official biography of Ram the journalist tracks down, whose cover is arranged so that "Sita is absent" (Arni) — an image that carries Valmiki's Ram-as-subject structure straight into the visual economy of a media age, where whose face gets to be on the cover is itself an argument.

The recovered testimony from the same investigation, attributed to Kaikeyi, only intensifies this concern rather than resolving it. Arni grants Kaikeyi a great deal of space to give her own account of the exile she is blamed for. Yet, that recovered version too comes to us through the very machinery the story is part of, answerable to the same question of what this city can afford to publish (Arni). Recovery does not sit outside the logic on which Ayodhya runs; it is merely another version competing for the status of the story that sells. Ayodhya, by the end of this novel, has become the golden age narrative in the most literal sense: a city built to be told, a telling that requires its queen's absence, and every attempt to correct the record still available for the same machine to absorb.

Ayodhya, 2024–2026: Reconstruction as Naturalisation

The rest of this piece turns from the fictional city to the one currently being rebuilt. I make that turn not to allege wrongdoing but to test the reach of the essay's own instrument. If naturalisation is a technique rather than a period style, it should be legible in the reconstruction as clearly as in the fiction, and it is. Since the Ram Mandir's consecration in January 2024, Ayodhya has been remade at a scale the novels could not have foreseen. The state master-plan for the next quarter century — "Vision Ayodhya-2047" alongside "Master Plan 2031" — is projected at roughly ₹85,000 crore across some 250 government-backed projects, from a heritage corridor and riverfront development to a new airport and highway extension (Ayodhya

Development Authority). The vocabulary that frames this build-out is where the analytic interest lies. A study circulated by outlets aligned with the incumbent politics put visitor numbers in the temple's first six months at eleven crore, reported shopkeepers' incomes up fivefold, and christened the whole undertaking, without further argument, an "economic renaissance" ("Ayodhya's 'Economic Renaissance'").

That word, *renaissance* — a city reborn through consecration — does the same work Barthes described and Arni dramatised. Rajagopal's central observation about the Ramayan serial is precisely this doubleness: audiences were invited to imagine a return to an epic golden age at the very moment its sponsors were embracing neoliberal globalisation, television hinging the two together (Rajagopal 4–9). The renaissance branding of 2024–26 runs the same hinge, now in the register of urban planning and investment. Christophe Jaffrelot situates such state-backed civilisational spectacle within the consolidation of an "ethnic democracy" under Hindu-nationalist governance (Jaffrelot 1–12), while Manisha Basu's account of Hindutva's "urban nationalism" describes exactly this fusion of sacred rhetoric and city-building, in which infrastructure itself becomes an argument about whom the nation belongs to (Basu 3–9). Read through that scholarship, the renaissance vocabulary is not a neutral description of growth; it is the labour of naturalisation performed on brick and road, the same offering-toward-a-site logic the brick campaign rehearsed in 1989, only faster. Valmiki's inventory of gilded piles never had to advertise itself. A renaissance requires repeated advertisement, and the capacity of the site to absorb such declarations — to convert a road, a study, or even a private investor's high-profile land purchase into one more sign of civilisational return — is the phenomenon the fiction has been describing all along.

There is also, as I write, a live procedural counterpart. A Special Investigation Team set up by the Uttar Pradesh government in 2026 has been auditing the Shri Ram Janmabhoomi Teerth Kshetra Trust over allegations that donations were diverted, and a separate thread examines a

land deal in which a plot bought for roughly ₹2 crore was resold to the trust for many times that within minutes; the trust denies any wrongdoing, and the SIT has not filed its final report ("Commission-for-Jobs Angle"). I cite this press reporting as primary evidence of an ongoing controversy, not as scholarly authority, and I draw no conclusion from it about anyone's guilt. What it offers the argument is structural, not evidentiary. Barthes describes naturalisation not as a single act but as a labour repeated against evidence that threatens to break the surface (Barthes 118–19), and Arni's novel dramatises exactly that: a golden-age story that needs a managed distance between what is said and what is known, a distance some figure at the margin — the server in Lanka, the exiled queen — can always see. An audit is one institutional form that seeing can take. The fiction did not need to get the details right to get the shape right, and it is the shape, not the verdict, that this essay claims to read.

Conclusion

Treating Ayodhya as a trope rather than as inert scenery changes what these texts are saying. Valmiki's city is where everything that follows flows from, precisely because it does not argue itself into being: it is a completed whole that others must respond to rather than simply describe. Banker's city licenses sanctioned violence by presenting its own violation as an embodiment of assault—Tripathi's licenses legal critique by standing outside its own idealisation. Joseph's, approached from the periphery, licenses the saving of face disguised as rescue. Arni names the price of the one person the golden age cannot afford to include. None of these cities is a static panorama. Each is a stage for the production and exposure of political legitimacy, and none can be understood as such except against the definitive, wholly present city Valmiki lays out in Canto V.

That the real city has spent two years being rebuilt under a discourse of golden opportunity and national revival — while an investigation runs into where the money has gone — is not

evidence that the fiction foresaw anything. It is evidence that the technique the fiction describes is still in use. This tradition's most durable argument was never really about Rama, or Sita, or any named individual. It was about what a city has to do, narratively, so that it keeps being told as a triumph, and about how much labour that telling requires now that the city can no longer simply be measured and set apart. Valmiki did that labour silently, once. State television did it loudly in 1987. A nationwide campaign of consecrated brick did it in 1989. Four novelists did it in distinct idioms between 2003 and 2015. A state master-plan is doing it now. The apparatus outlasts any single medium that carries it, and it grows louder, not quieter, the more work it has to do. The 2026 audit will resolve on its own timeline and by its own standards of proof; my argument concerns the presence of a naturalising structure in the present, and that structure is visible whatever any inquiry finally concludes.

Notes:

1. A note on the citation of digital editions. This paper uses digital editions of Ashok K. Banker's *Prince of Ayodhya* (2003) and Samhita Arni's *The Missing Queen* (2013). Because these editions carry no stable pagination, and following MLA's convention for unpaginated texts, both works are cited by author alone throughout; no page or chapter locators are given, so that the citations remain internally consistent.
2. As of this writing, the Special Investigation Team's audit of the Shri Ram Janmabhoomi Teerth Kshetra Trust is still open. The reporting cited here is offered as evidence of an ongoing public controversy only; nothing in this essay asserts wrongdoing beyond what those sources themselves report.
3. Valmiki is cited throughout from Ralph T. H. Griffith's nineteenth-century verse translation, by book (Bālakāṇḍa) and canto rather than by page, following the usual convention for

citing classical epic in translation. Griffith spells the city's name "Ayodhyá"; I have kept his diacritic inside direct quotation and dropped it elsewhere for readability.

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