

From Ellora To Ayodhya: A Semiotic Analysis of Rama Iconography in Indian Temple Traditions

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the transformation of Rama from an epic hero of the Ramayana into one of the most powerful political symbols in contemporary India. It analyses the transformation of the iconography of Rama through a semiotic analysis of selected temples across India, tracing the evolution of religious signs into markers of political and cultural identity. Drawing upon structuralist and semiotic frameworks associated with Ferdinand de Saussure, Roland Barthes, and Claude Lévi-Strauss, the study investigates how visual representations of Rama generate shifting meanings across historical contexts. The analysis focuses on five sites: the Kailasanatha Temple at Ellora, the Kodandarama Temple at Hampi, the Sri Sita Ramachandraswamy Temple at Bhadrachalam, the Rama Raja Temple at Orchha, and the contemporary Ram Mandir at Ayodhya. Through an examination of iconographic elements, bodily postures, divine attributes, and architectural settings, the paper demonstrates how Rama's image has evolved from narrative representation to royal symbol and, more recently, to a sign of collective political identity. The

study argues that temple iconography functions as a dynamic semiotic system through which religious, cultural, and ideological meanings are continually negotiated and reconstructed. By analysing Rama as both myth and political symbol, the paper demonstrates how mythological narratives continue to shape contemporary political imagination and collective identity in twenty-first-century India.

Keywords: Semiotics; Rama Iconography; Structuralism; Temple Architecture; Political Symbolism.

INTRODUCTION

The mythological figure of Rama has been a central symbol in the cultural imagination of the Indian subcontinent, with his story and image undergoing significant transformations across different historical, religious, and political contexts. At the heart of this semiotic evolution lies the dynamic relationship between the sign, signifier, and signified, where the connotative meanings associated with Rama have been consistently reinterpreted and renegotiated. This essay examines the evolving iconography of Lord Rama, exploring how his visual depictions have come to embody the ideals of kingship, dharma, and collective identity within Hindu societies. As Sheldon Pollock discusses in his analysis, the cult of Rama underwent considerable development, particularly from the 12th century onward, leading to a more structured temple worship that reflects broader cultural and political ideologies (Pollock, 1993). The selection of specific temples and idols for this semiotic analysis follows a deliberate chronological and ideological progression that traces the evolution of Rama worship from purely religious beginnings to its current political significance. Beginning with the 8th-century Kailasanatha Temple at Ellora, where Rama appears merely as part of narrative reliefs, through the regionally significant Kodandarama Temple at Hampi and the syncretic traditions visible in the Sri Sita Ramachandraswamy Temple at Bhadrachalam, to the unique royal symbolism of the Rama Raja Temple at Orchha, and finally culminating in the recently constructed Ram Mandir at Ayodhya. By examining the denotative and connotative meanings embedded in these structures and their

icons, we can better understand the complex interplay between religion, politics, and cultural identity in Indian society, especially the transformation of religious symbols into tools for political mobilization and identity formation.

EARLIEST SCULPTURES

Initially, the worship of Rama in temples was minimal, with only sparse evidence of dedicated cultic practices until the late 11th century. The early depictions were largely linked to narratives from the *Ramayana* and other texts, serving more as decorative elements in temples primarily dedicated to other deities like Shiva or Vishnu.¹ Among the earliest images of Rama found on Hindu temples are a series of relief carvings from the 6th century Vishnu temple at Deogarh in Madhya Pradesh. These reliefs depict scenes from the life of Rama that closely follow episodes from the *Ramayana*. Chronologically following these are several relief carvings of Rama found at various 7th and 8th centuries Hindu temples located in the Deccan several hundred miles south of Deogarh.² The latest reliefs from this period are found on the plinth of the 8th century Kailasanatha temple at Ellora, as episodes from the *Ramayana* carved in horizontal registers that were meant to be viewed from top to bottom (Romain, 2015).³ Julie Marie Romain argues in her dissertation that images of Rama were placed within the architectural framework of the Hindu temple to underline his significance



¹ Notably, the *Ramayana* reliefs are often found on Shiva temples, indicating the iconographic program of the Hindu temple was not strictly determined by sectarian affiliation.

² An area of northern Karnataka that was formerly associated with the court of the Chalukyas of Badami (ruled circa 550-750 CE).

³ The *Ramayana* reliefs are placed on various parts of the sixth to eighth century Hindu temples including the plinth, within architectural niches on the outer walls, and on the face of pillar columns inside the mandapa. The assumption has always been that these reliefs were placed there to serve didactic purposes.

as a courtly hero. With the advent of dedicated temples for Rama, the iconography began to take on more profound significance. Idol-worship became a means of representing the divine qualities of Rama: valor, righteousness (dharma), and the ideal king. The increased construction of Rama temples in the 12th century and beyond marks a significant cultural shift, as these sites become central to community identity and collective memory. Rama, unlike many other avatars of Vishnu, was not depicted with the traditional four arms or the usual Vaishnavite symbols of the conch, discus, club, and lotus. Instead, his human form, replete with royal features such as broad eyes, long arms, curly tresses, and ornaments, emphasizes his earthly role as a prince and king.

EARLY DEDICATED RAMA TEMPLES

The emergence of Rama as a model for kingship during the temple-building era suggests that the idol represents more than a divine figure; it embodies the ideals of kingship, dharma, and governance. This is evident in inscriptions associating kings with Rama's heroic qualities, as Pollock describes, linking their reigns to his virtues. The visual rhetoric of Rama's imagery evolves to encompass the struggles, triumphs, and ideals of the societies that venerated him, making the idol a powerful symbol of unity and cultural continuity. The most popular image of Rama is that of him holding the bow (*kodanda*) which signifies his warrior nature and his role as the upholder of dharma. Known as *Kodandarama* when depicted with the bow, Rama becomes a symbol of strength and righteousness. The bow and arrow are powerful visual signifiers of his role in vanquishing evil, aligning with the broader narrative of the Ramayana, where he fights the demon king Ravana. Early terracotta figures from the Kushan Empire, which showcase Rama in a standing posture with a bow, reflect simplicity and power, evoking a sense of calmness and strength that emphasizes his heroism. Colossal granite statues in South India convey majesty and grandeur like the idol from the Kodandarama Temple, Hampi, which is in the form of a deep bas-relief of Rama, Lakshmana, and Sita carved on a boulder embodying not only the religious significance of Rama but also the local mythological associations that give the image



additional layers of meaning.⁴ It is believed that Sugriva had carved the idols of Rama, Laxmana and Sita from the natural boulder on the hillside and built the temple for the worship of the deities at this spot. This connection between the myth and the physical form of the idol highlights the semiotic relationship between Rama's divine image and his role in the epic Ramayana, particularly in the Kishkindha Kanda, where the episode of Vali's defeat occurs. The image of Rama here signifies his heroic act of killing Vali and restoring justice by crowning Sugriva as the king as reflected in the local geography and legend.

The presence of key figures in Rama's life, such as Sita, Lakshmana, and Hanuman, adds layers of meaning to his iconography. Statues featuring Rama with Sita emphasize his unwavering devotion to his wife, showcasing ideals of love and fidelity, for example Sri Sita Ramachandraswamy temple in Bhadrachalam, where Sita is seen sitting on Rama's lap.⁵ Sita represents devotion and purity, while Rama symbolizes the ideal husband, embodying unwavering protection, love, and righteousness. This idol also juxtaposes the *shankha-chakra* symbols associated with Vishnu to Rama's idol as his divine aspect is emphasized. This language, much like any other system of symbols, is a code that relies on the shared cultural and religious knowledge of those who engage with it. Just as the bow and arrow instantly signal Rama's identity, and the flute immediately evokes Krishna, the conch and discus are recognized markers of Vishnu, creating a semiotic bridge between the human incarnation (*avatara*) and the eternal deity. For individuals aware of the codifications in Hindu mythological symbols, these symbols of Vishnu placed in the hands of Rama invoke an understanding of Rama's true nature as an incarnation of Vishnu who plays a central role in maintaining cosmic order (*dharma*). The *Padmasana* (lotus position), in which Rama sits in this temple, is associated with meditation and mastery over the mind and body. The stillness and composure of the sitting posture imply that



⁴ According to the local myths, the temple stands on the spot where Vali was killed by Lord Rama before he went on to crown Sugriva as the king of Kishkinda.

⁵ This is similar to the iconography associated with Lakshmi-Narasimha, where the 'half man-half lion' avatara of Vishnu known as Narasimha is depicted with his consort Lakshmi, seated on his lap.

the deity is not in immediate action but rather in a state of watchful meditation, awaiting the prayers of the devotee.

This form can also be seen in the Rama Raja Temple of Orchha, where Raja Ram (Rama as a king) is depicted in *Padmasana* (lotus position), which is a familiar symbol in both Hindu mythology and art, representing a state of meditation, balance, and transcendence. However, what sets this particular image apart is the unique aspect of *Padmasana* here that only Rama's left leg is crossed over his right thigh, a deviation from the usual complete crossing of legs seen in the standard posture. This subtle shift in posture symbolizes a mix of divine restfulness and readiness for action. His body is in a meditative state, but his posture is not entirely passive, indicating that, although seated, Rama is prepared to act when the time demands. Adding to this symbolic duality of peace and readiness is the presence of a sword in Rama's right hand and a shield in the other. These martial symbols are somewhat unusual for representations of Rama, who is often depicted with a bow and arrow. The sword and shield create a powerful visual juxtaposition against the peaceful meditative posture, embodying Rama as both a king and warrior, a protector of his people, but also someone who defends dharma (righteousness). This temple's positioning of Rama as the supreme king aligns with his visual depiction – calm, powerful, and divinely authoritative.

MODERN RAM TEMPLE

The Ram Mandir in Ayodhya and the Ram Lalla idol have become potent symbols within the Hindu nationalist political project. The recent consecration of the Ram Lalla idol at the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya has sparked significant interest, particularly regarding its representation of Rama as a five-year-old child. The idol, sculpted from black



stone known as "Krishna Shila," conveys a powerful denotation: a five-year-old child form of Lord Rama, known as Ram Lalla,⁶ depicted in a standing posture holding a bow and arrow. This direct representation signifies purity and innocence, at the same time evoking the divine childhood of Rama as the embodiment of dharma and righteousness in Hindu mythology. The choice of depicting Lord Rama as a child, or Ram Lalla, aligns with the presumed identity of Ayodhya as his birthplace⁷, emphasizing on hindu identity and reclamation. This representation of Ram Lalla resonates with contemporary Hindu identity and symbolizes a reclaiming of cultural heritage, positioning Rama not only as a god but as a symbol of national and cultural pride. At the heart of the iconography is Rama, not just as a king, but as a divine child, a manifestation that carries deep symbolic significance in the context of devotion and divine authority. Furthermore, the visual qualities of the idol, with its polished surface and intricate carvings, draw attention to the craftsmanship and spiritual reverence associated with the deity. The idol's adornments—golden bow and arrow, along with the crown and jewelry—add to its connotative meaning, portraying Rama not just as a child but also as a princely figure deserving of worship. By enshrining the youthful Rama as the presiding deity, the temple invokes the narrative of a pure, untainted Hindu past that needs to be revived and protected from perceived external threats. Politically, the Ram Mandir has become a symbol of Hindu nationalist triumph and the reclamation of what is perceived as a historically "lost" Hindu territory. The campaign to build the temple, spearheaded by the BJP and the broader Hindutva movement, was framed as a struggle to right the "wrongs" of India's Muslim-ruled past, when the Babri Masjid was constructed on the supposed birthplace of Rama. The BJP and RSS have effectively transformed the temple from a purely religious space into a symbol of Hindu political assertion.

⁶ While older temples emphasized Rama's roles as a ruler, warrior, or divine being, the Ram Lalla idol intentionally evokes innocence and vulnerability, creating a powerful emotional narrative of a child-deity whose birthplace was "usurped" and needs "protection."

⁷ The construction of this temple fulfills the long-standing demand of Hindu devotees to build a grand structure at the site believed to be Rama's literal birthplace.

CONCLUSION

The evolving iconography of Lord Rama reflects the dynamic nature of Hindu religious and cultural traditions. From the early depictions as a decorative element in temples to the emergence of dedicated Rama temples and the recent consecration of the Ram Lalla idol, Rama's visual representations have come to embody the ideals of kingship, dharma, and collective identity within Hindu societies. The evolution of Rama's iconography from narrative reliefs to divine idol reflects shifts in worship practices and social values, underscoring the power of visual culture to sustain religious continuity. The progression from the Kailasanatha Temple to the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya represents not just an evolution in religious architecture and iconography, but also mirrors the changing nature of Indian society and politics. The analysis of these specific temples and idols enables us to trace several parallel developments: the architectural evolution from rock-cut to constructed temples, the iconographic progression from narrative scenes to independent icons, the growing connection between temple patronage and political authority, and the geographical spread of Rama worship across different cultural zones of India. Through a semiotic analysis of these temples and their associated idols, this study examines how religious architecture and iconography reflect broader cultural and political developments in Indian society.

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