

“Time is inevitable” — a truth we often read in books, hear in movies, and see play out around us in unforgiving fashion. It is the great subduer, described as being undefeated in its onslaught of change, bringing all things to an inexorable end.

Sometimes, however, there are places we encounter that seem to defy this truth, that continue to persist in the face of time’s inexhaustible waves, manifesting in more than one era for eyes of multiple generations to behold.

In the Dhanusha District of Nepal, Hindus believe one can find such a place, the city Janakpur, known today as capital of the country’s Madhesh Province, but said to have once been the capital of a great and ancient kingdom called Mithila.

Enclosed on the north by the Himalayas, on the east by the Kosi river, on the south by the Ganges, and the west by the Gandaki river, Mithila, as conveyed in Hindu texts, was ruled by the Vaidehi dynasty, of which the kings held the title Janak, hence the name of its capital, Janakpur.

As recounted by Richard Burghart in his 1978 essay *The Disappearance and Reappearance of Janakpur*, in the 23rd generation of this dynasty, Mithila became afflicted by a great drought, and so the Janak of that time, King Seeradwaja, desperate to gain the blessings of Indra, the god connected with rain, decided to perform a great sacrifice in his honor.

It was in the process of this great sacrifice, as Seeradwaja turned the soil with a golden plough, that something miraculous happened: there, lying in the furrow, he discovered a beautiful baby girl. Immediately overcome by affection, he picked her up, took her home, named her, and made her his daughter, raising her as princess of the kingdom.

For those who aren’t familiar with all the details of the Hindu epic the Ramayana, this princess was none other than Sita, the goddess of the great epic. To make a long story short, when Sita came of age, she was married in Janakpur to Rama, the divine incarnation of Vishnu.

Later, while living in the jungles of the Vindhya mountains after Rama was exiled from his home in Ayodhya where he was supposed to inherit the throne, Sita was kidnapped by the powerful Ravana who, deluged by her beauty, wanted her for himself.

Rama, of course, with the help of his brother Lakshman, the mighty Hanuman, and an army of vanaras (the race of intelligent forest dwellers Hanuman belonged to), found Ravana and defeated him in battle. Rescuing Sita, the couple returned to Ayodhya, where its citizens welcomed Rama with open arms, as he triumphantly took his rightful place as king.

As for Janakpur, Hindu texts say it continued to be ruled by the Vaidehi kings until many years later, when a great war (known today as the culmination of India's second epic, the Mahabharata) brought an end to the dynasty.

Destroyed by the opposing army, the remains of the city were engulfed in jungle, as the auspicious site of Sita's birthplace disappeared from the eyes of the world, becoming in the minds of many, nothing more than an imagined obscurity of the ancient past.

Naturally, such obscurity was not destined to last, for in the 16th and 17th centuries CE, when the practice of Rama worship spread throughout the Ganges basin, so did a desire to discover the various sacred sites connected to his beloved pastimes.

And for a while it seemed this desire was being satiated, as many of these places, like Ayodhya (Rama's birthplace), and Chitrakut (where he, Lakshman, and Sita spent 12 years of their exile), were indeed found and established as sites of pilgrimage.

Yet, as the years rolled by, and the location of Janakpur continued to remain a mystery, it seemed fate was playing a cruel trick on Rama and Sita's devotees, depriving them of a most cherished spiritual sanctuary.

It eventually became apparent, however, that fate was merely taking its time, waiting for the right people to come along, one's whose devotional longings were so potent, that Rama and Sita could not help but reciprocate, and in ways that were most extraordinary.

The first two devotees to become recipients of this reciprocation, according to the oral testimonies of various bards and pandits, were ascetics named Chaturbhuj Giri and Sur Kishor, both of whom arrived at the ancient site of Janakpur during roughly the turn of the 18th century CE.

In Giri's case, it's said he traveled to northern Mithila to find a place of solitude in the region's wilderness so that he could deepen his focus of devotion to Rama and Sita by further disciplining his mind, body, and speech.

One day, while taking a break in the course of his journey to sleep under the shelter of an old banyan tree, Rama appeared to him in a dream.

"Where you now lie sleeping," Rama told him, "is the land on which the ancient city of Janakpur once stood...Before departing for Ayodhya after my marriage with Sita, I gave to my father-in-law four images of myself so that he might gaze upon them to help ease the pain of our separation. These images lie buried in this ground. Raise them up so that they can once again be gazed upon by those who wish to obtain release from this transient world of dualities."

Initially overwhelmed with joy at the sound of his beloved deity's voice, Giri quickly became dejected.

"How can I serve you in this lonely jungle," he replied. "I do not have the means by which to build you a palace or offer you nice meals. When devotees, hearing of your presence, eagerly travel to this place to seek your divine vision, but quickly realize how poorly you live, I will hang my head in shame."