

**What makes a 'Good City'?**  
**A Hindu Perspective**  
**(extract)**

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Cities in precolonial India were not only centres of trade and commerce but also of learning, religion, art and culture. The city/village is seen as the locale for the encounter between gods and humans. In other words, a traditional *nagara* or city is one where the sacred and the secular mingle. Temples have been an essential part of city/village life, and the link between the cosmic and the human is made visible through art, worship, poetry, music, dance and so forth. Temples were not simply places of worship, but also centres of cultural, educational and social life. The Hindu god Shiva, the Lord of the Dance, is the patron of arts, and even to this day classical dancers invoke his blessings. In this connection mention needs to be made of Bharata's *Natya Shastra* (about second century BCE), a comprehensive and foundational work on dance, music, drama, poetry and other subjects. Debates and discourses among scholars, music and dance performances, as well as the meeting of the local assembly to discuss civic matters including elections to local bodies took place, within the temple premises. The temple also played a significant part in the economy of the village. Generous donations to the temple made it possible for temples to advance money to needy farmers and others as well as give employment not only to ritual specialists but also to teachers, musicians, dancers, tailors, accountants, florists and many others.

[...]

The city plays a significant role in providing the locale for the pursuit and fulfilment of the four aims of life (*purusharthas*) enumerated in Hindu texts: *dharma* (duty, righteousness, morality) *kama* (pleasure), *artha* (wealth) and *moksha* (liberation). The last goal, *moksha*, or release from the cycle of rebirth, is often associated with the forest where one seeks to devote one's life to spiritual contemplation. Even within an urban context, the final goal (*moksha*) is relevant, but the emphasis is on fulfilling duties - the means to the goal rather than the goal itself. The pursuits of material gain and pleasure are considered legitimate as long as they are regulated by the principle of *dharma*. Of the four goals, *dharma* is the foremost governing principle that needs to be applied in all situations and it is seen as a preparation for the ultimate end. The focus is on affirming life in all its aspects - intellectual, artistic, sensual, economic and spiritual - regulated by the principle of *dharma*.

[...]

The subject of town *planning* was known as *sthapathyam* and a town-planner or civic architect was called *sthapati* - the master builder. In precolonial India, kings had their own civic architects and city superintendents with an array of assistants. A civic architect was one who was not only well-versed in architectural knowledge and town-planning but was also required to have a thorough knowledge of sacred scriptures as well as other branches of knowledge such as mathematics, astrology and botany. The city fashioned by the architect was expected to reflect the social,

religious, and cultural aspirations of people. It was absolutely essential for a civic architect to have such comprehensive knowledge 'in as much he had to bring out in the city an expression of the life of its citizens. He had to carefully prepare a chart marking in it the boundaries, the roads, the scheme of tree planting and the location of public buildings, tanks and gardens' (Venkataramana Reddy) . To put it differently, a civic architect was expected to make the city an environmentally friendly place.

[...]

The idea of a sacred city or temple as the centre is not simply confined to one geographical location, although some sacred locations such as Tirupathi or Benares are seen as exemplifying in a more powerful manner the connection between the human and the cosmic order. Since most Hindus believe that this universe is a manifestation of an eternal order, Truth or Divine, they perceive a link between the human and the cosmic order. Although the infinite is seen as formless, beyond all forms, it is seen as manifesting itself through forms, thus providing a link between the formless and form, the divine and the human. Sacred cosmologies have been recreated in various places outside India. One of most significant forms of expression of the interconnectedness is exemplified in the construction of traditional/classic style Hindu temples in Sydney, Pittsburgh, and in Birmingham where stands the newly constructed Balaji Venkateswara temple.

[...]

[T]he Hindu tradition has a rich treasure of textual sources which are relevant to contemporary concerns and could be used in constructive ways. A good city is one that embodies the concept of the welfare of all humans as well as the created order (*sarva-bhuta-hita*). A good city is one that is dharmic -- where truth, righteousness, morality, and duty prevail. It is a place where all activities benefit both the individual and the community; where there is concern for the environment; where there is room for trust and hope; and where people from diverse backgrounds and cultural traditions can live in peace and harmony.