

**What makes a Good City
A Sikh Perspective
(extract)
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Begumpura – the City without Sorrow

The idea of an ideal state based on truth, justice and fairness is further expounded by Bhagat Ravidas, a saint of medieval India, who writes in the GGS about *Begumpura*, the city without sorrow. He defines this city as God's kingdom, a city based on fairness and equality, in which citizens live in peace and security and are wealthy and contented.

*Baygumpura, 'the city without sorrow', is the name of the town.
There is no suffering or anxiety there.
There are no troubles or taxes on commodities there.
There is no fear, blemish or downfall there.
Now, I have found this most excellent city.
There is lasting peace and safety there, O Siblings of Destiny.
God's Kingdom is steady, stable and eternal.
There is no second or third status; all are equal there.
That city is populous and eternally famous.
Those who live there are wealthy and contented.
They stroll about freely, just as they please.
They know the Mansion of the Lord's Presence, and no one blocks their way.
Says Ravi Daas, the emancipated shoe-maker:
whoever is a citizen there, is a friend of mine.*

GGGS, p345

Ravidas describes a place that humanity should strive for, a place that, through spiritual enlightenment he has found. He manages to encapsulate both spiritual and temporal needs in the city without sorrow and offers a glimpse of this city of God, one which prospers forever, in which all citizens are equal, regardless of class or caste, a place where problems associated with cities such as crime, poverty, violence and homelessness don't exist. Citizens are free to move and speak without fear or persecution signifying a city 'government' that cultivates an environment of understanding and respect of people from all backgrounds, cultures and faiths and also allows freedom of speech. More importantly, no one blocks a citizen's spiritual endeavour. In terms of the economy of the city, an equitable system for business is set up, avoiding excessive regulations and taxes, to encourage fair and free trade so that citizens are not penalised when purchasing goods. Wealth and taxes in a city are created for the betterment of its citizens.

Begumpura is also described as city that is populous and eternally famous. This implies that such a city is a lure for numerous peoples, and far from placing restrictions on entry, such a city welcomes all. This is a city of God, for all kindred spirits and not just for fellow Sikhs. It is the duty of such a city to be a torch bearer for

the 'good city' concept, to show hospitality to all who wish to stay there and to build bridges to other communities and cities, particularly those that need most help.

Models for a Good City

Begumpura defines the epitome of a good city in Sikhism. In practice the Sikh gurus set up various communities or cities for their followers which attempted to encompass the 'Sikh values' as enshrined in the GGS. At the end of his life, Guru Nanak settled in Kartarpur, a settlement he had founded on the banks of the river Ravi. Here he was joined by his family but very quickly attracted a 'community of believers' around him. This was not a community of wandering holy men or an ascetic order but a community of householders engaged in the day to day activities of work and family. Guru Nanak put into practice his belief that one did not have to renounce their families and worldly possessions and become ascetics to find God. Connecting with God depended more on one's morality and conduct in life. At the heart of the city he founded a *Dharamsal*- a place of religious gathering where people would gather together in a congregation, called the *Sadh Sangat* (holy congregation) to worship and sing devotional hymns in praise of the creator. The Dharamsal was open to all irrespective of caste, creed, or class. To further enforce the notion of equality of humanity, Guru Nanak instituted the *langar*, a free community kitchen, in which men and women, irrespective of their status, would sit together and partake in a common meal prepared collectively by volunteers from the community. The *langar* required active participation from all members of the community and inculcated the essential component of *seva*, voluntary and selfless service, carried out with utter humility. Kartarpur and other cities (or settlements) founded by the Sikh gurus can be seen as mini prototypes for the good city. They were all cities which had at their heart a spiritual engine driving all aspects of life. This was represented physically by a central place of worship around which the city was built. People were encouraged to work hard and honestly for a living and share the fruits of their labour:

*O Nanak, one who earns with sweat of his brow,
and gives some from his hands,
He is the one who recognizes the true path.*

GGS, p. 1245