

## What makes a 'Good City'? A Hindu Perspective

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When we were asked to write a short paper on the topic of city, the first thing that came to my mind was the Indus valley civilization which flourished in the northwest of the Indian subcontinent around 2500 BCE. Of particular importance were the two highly urbanized cities of the Indus valley civilization - Harappa (Punjab) and Mohjenodaro (Sind), now in West Pakistan. What we know from archaeological excavations is that these cities show a highly advanced sense of civic planning and organization.

The word for city in Sanskrit is *nagara*. A *nagarika* was a city person - a person of refined taste and culture and one who enjoyed the good things of life. While the term *nagara* was used for the town, *mahanagara* was used for a considerably larger well- established wealthy, politically significant city, and *grama* for village, the smallest settlement .<sup>1</sup> A market town situated along a coast was referred to as *pattana* or *pattinam*. The evolution and growth of towns did not follow a uniform pattern. Their development was influenced by a variety of factors. Some towns began as commercial, educational, administrative, or pilgrim centres. In some cases, the name of the town indicated the main occupation of its inhabitants. Each city had distinctive features and differed from the characteristics of another city.<sup>2</sup>

*Nagara* and *grama* are not to be seen as mutually exclusive locations - the relation between the two has been rather fluid. It was mainly during the colonial period that the distinction between *nagara* and village became marked, and with the rapid industrialization that occurred soon after Indian Independence, the polarity between the two was all the more visible.

### City and its Functions

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.

With the emergence of various religious movements in the seventh and eighth centuries, educational activity pervaded the urban ethos and culture. The Buddhist university at Nalanda which attracted scholars from China and other places was in existence even before the universities of Oxford and Cambridge were founded (Sen 2005: 354). Schools or *pathashalas* were attached to temples where pupils were taught subjects such as literature, philosophy and ethics. Jain centres for advanced religious education, Hindu Sanskrit colleges of brahmanical learning (*ghatikas*) and Hindu monastic institutions (*mathas*) were in vogue. The *mathas* functioned not simply as monastic centres of education but also as feeding centres and rest houses for pilgrims.<sup>3</sup> *Chatrams*, traditional centres of hospitality in precolonial India, which were established by kings, were open to common people - pilgrims, the sick and the needy were taken care of - but with the advent of colonial rule these institutions of hospitality were deprived of their traditional role. What was seen as an act of religious duty (*dharma*) came to be seen as a waste of resources by colonial administrators and kings were discouraged from using the revenue to maintain hospitality centres.<sup>4</sup>

Vatsyayana, the author of the *Kamasutra* (composed between first and fourth centuries BCE) saw urban living as the epitome of civilization and civilized life. The *Kamasutra*, which deals with the art of love making, courtship, marriage and family life, offers some valuable insights into the daily life of a well-do-to and refined city person (*nagarika*). In Vatsyayana's city, as Thapar puts it 'comfortable if not luxurious surroundings were provided to harmonize with moods conducive to poetry, painting and recitals of music, in all of which the young city dilettante was expected to excel ... The young man had also to be trained in the art of love.... The courtesan was a normal feature of urban life, neither romanticized nor treated with contempt. Judging by the training given to a courtesan, it was among the more demanding professions, for, unlike the

prostitute, she was a cultured and sociable companion similar to the geisha of Japan or the hetaera of Greece'.<sup>5</sup> Courtesans attached to royal courts were highly accomplished in art, music, poetry, dance and literature. In fact, courtesans enjoyed certain privileges which were not within the reach of ordinary women. Some eminent courtesans were patrons of the arts and were actively engaged in literary pursuits and were held in high esteem.

### **City in literary and epic narratives**

The city finds a prominent place in various sacred and literary texts - in Sanskrit epics such as the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, and Tamil epic poems such as *Silappadigaram* and *Manimegalai*, as well as in Kalidasa's play *Shakuntala* and Vatsyayana's *Kamasutra*, the last two the most well-known in Europe. For example, in the Tamil epic *Silappadikaram*, Kaveripattinam (also known as Pukar or Puhar) figures as a city of technical order - vibrant, wealthy and a heterogenous city which is hospitable to strangers and immigrants in search of fortune.<sup>6</sup> In Kautliya's *Arthashastra*, a treatise on statecraft and polity, one finds the image of a well-planned city where people of diverse occupations interact, although within the given framework. Both the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* show an advanced stage of city-life, although we find some poetic or mythical descriptions of the city. Valmiki's *Ramayana* abounds in descriptions of the physical features of the city of Ayodhya and Sri Lanka, such as the existence of city-gates, moats, streets of different sizes, street-lights, recreational places (parks and forest groves), and the modes of transport within the cities (by elephant, horse and the chariot). One also finds shops, markets and storehouses, and even eating-houses. Being active centres of trade and commerce, the cities were prosperous. One gets the impression that the cities were repositories of wealth. Besides a couple of descriptions of the city as a desolate place, the image is one of a prosperity. The author of the epic paints an idealized picture of the city.<sup>7</sup> The city of Ayodhya (now the scene of conflict) is seen as a symbol of the ideal moral or cosmic order and the king as the ideal monarch whose rule is just and fair. A perfect kingdom is where all live in peace and prosperity. It is worth recalling Gandhi's constant reference to the ideal kingdom of Rama (*rama rajya*) in his efforts to establish a society where there would be equality, justice and peace.

### **City as a site of liberation and alienation**

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*.<sup>8</sup>

A sacred city such as Banares (also known as Kashi or Varanasi) is seen as a place where all the four aims of life can be harmonized - pleasure, wealth, duty and liberation.<sup>9</sup> Banares or Kashi is spoken of as the City of Gods - 'the Luminous, the City of Light' - where one can attain liberation.<sup>10</sup> Although there are other sacred cities, Banares is seen as encompassing all other sacred cities.<sup>11</sup> For most Hindus, sacred cities such as Banares serve as a locale for life here and now as well as offering a safe passage for life after death.

In some brahmanical texts, the city is also seen as a place to be avoided (*Apastamba*) *Dharmasutra* (I, 32,21).<sup>12</sup> Some see the quest for liberation as impossible in a city. The Bauddhayana declares that: "It is impossible for one to obtain salvation, who lives in a town covered with dust" (II, 3, 6, 33)<sup>13</sup>. Although there are negative images of the city as a dreadful place, the contrast between the city and forest/country is not as stark in early Sanskrit or Tamil literature as it is in later epic and courtly narratives. In Kalidasa's play *Shakuntala*, a person from the country is referred to as *gramya*, a person who is not acquainted with the courtly language (Sanskrit), norms and way of life of a city person. While the epics celebrate city life, one can see the contrast between the city and forest in the Forest sections of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, and the fourth stage in the life of a householder (the other three being student, forest dweller and renunciant).<sup>14</sup> The contrast between the city and forest do not necessarily imply discontinuity between the two.

## **Town planning**

Among other things, an important feature of any city has to do with town planning. Ideas about town planning are found in treatises on statecraft (*niti shastra*) such as the *Arthashastra*, dating back to the fourth century BCE, and *Sukraniti* (of disputable date) and in treatises on architecture, planning, construction and design (*vastu shastra*). The last includes ancient texts such as

*Sthapathya Veda* (part of the *Atharva Veda* which is one of the four Vedas), *Manasara Shilpa Shastra*, *Mayamata*, and *Viswakarma Vastushastra*. Among other things, these texts deal with various aspects such as the layout of a city and matters relating to site selection, site planning and orientation, quality of soil, water resources, planting of trees and groves.

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. He was required to be acquainted with cultural and religious ideas, and social norms of people for whom he planned. In other words, 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'.<sup>15</sup> To put it differently, a civic architect was expected to make the city an environmentally friendly place (see City and Environment below).

The underlying principles governing treatises on architectural planning, construction and design (*vastu shastra*) have a metaphysical basis or orientation, that is, all life is interconnected and we are part of the universe and the universe impacts on us. A traditional city designed according to the principles of sacred geometry was based on cosmological theories. The link between the cosmic and human order (cosmic space and physical space) is reflected in *Vastu Purusha Mandala* (square grid) which forms the basis of most Indian architectural theories of design and construction not only of a temple but also of a building. *Vastu* means 'dwelling' or 'site', *purusha* refers to the cosmic person or energy and *mandala*, a geometric diagram representing the cosmos.<sup>16</sup> The cosmic person or *purusha* is shown lying in the square grid with his head facing east or northeast. Brahma, the creator, occupies the centre square called the Brahmasthana, with other gods assigned to various other smaller squares within the diagram. The correspondence between the human and cosmic order is not only reflected in temple architecture but also in town planning. The sacred texts 'define the conceptual model that is to hand whenever a town is planned. The precise manner in which it is rendered in any given case will naturally be influenced by other factors. Changing political and social conditions will modify how the model is perceived at a given moment, and how it is fulfilled will depend considerably on the pre-existing features of the selected site'.<sup>17</sup>

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 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.

### City and Environment

There are rich textual resources that one can draw upon to create an environmentally friendly city. Ideas about cities in precolonial India were closely linked with the concept of kingship and polity. Classical Sanskrit texts on polity and kingly duties (*dharma*) not only speak of a king's moral duty to protect his kingdom and his people but also require him to care for the environment. This is clearly articulated in the coronation oaths in texts such as the *Yajurveda Samhita* (9.22) and the *Mahabharata* (Santi Parva 59. 106.107) which stipulate that the king should act as a trustee of natural resources and protect his subjects: 'To you [state is given.] for agriculture, for well-being for prosperity, for development' (*Yajurveda Samhita*). A king who does not protect his subjects gets severe treatment (*Mahabharata* (Santi Parva 61.32.5) and in *Manusmriti* (8.307).<sup>18</sup> Even if a king was driven by economic motives, it was his *dharma* to protect his people and the environment. There are numerous other texts, which call for veneration of all aspects of creation. There are hymns to the Earth in the *Atharava Veda* - hymns asking the Earth to give us wealth (12:44) but at the same time respect for and protection of the Earth is expressed. That we should not cause injury to the Earth is made clear: ' Whatever I dig up of you, O Earth, may you of that have quick replenishment! O purifying one, may my thrust never reach into your vital points, your heart! (12:35).<sup>19</sup>

Despite its Machiavellian traits, the *Arthashastra* offers sound ideas on environmental management which was necessary to protect natural resources and promote the well being people, especially when empires were involved in warfare. The concerns included maintaining a proper irrigation system, construction of dams and bridges, as well as planting trees and plants, and

taking care of infirm animals. Kautilya's text also provides valuable information about farming and crop rotation and also about botanical matters ranging from seed collection to plant/tree classification, from diagnosis and treatment to landscaping. Superintendents appointed to oversee different departments of the state were required to have not only management skills but also expert knowledge in these matters. The *Arthashastra* takes a cautionary step not only with regard to the protection of natural resources from excessive use but also with protecting humans from natural calamities such as floods, fires, disease, famine and by making the necessary provisions at such times.<sup>20</sup> As a text that is concerned with the economic and political order of the society, the *Arthashastra* has a contemporary ring. It offers a blueprint for how the state and private ventures could conserve, cultivate and safeguard the earth and its natural resources. Although the text is concerned with political and economic gain, it gives serious attention to the welfare of the less fortunate or disadvantaged who are part of society.

Trees and gardens were an important aspect of town planning in precolonial India. Archeologically speaking, the genesis of Indian gardening and landscape tradition can be traced back to the Indus valley civilization where there is some evidence that some specific trees held in reverence were protected. References to and descriptions of gardens are found in various Hindu texts. The *Mahabharata* gives a graphic account of pleasure gardens. In a Hindu text on astronomy, *Brihatsamhita*, gardens are seen as the dwelling places of gods.<sup>21</sup> We have a vivid description of the private garden of wealthy people in the *Kamasutra*. A good wife is expected to take delight in gardening. She should surround the house with not only vegetable, fruit and herbal garden but also with beautiful flower garden as well as make it recreational by having a tank or pond and seats (Kamasutra 5. 1). Recreational gardens and parks were an integral part of city life. There were trained experts who maintained the garden, and in Kautilya's period an efficient system of managing public parks and gardens was in place. Some remarkable gardens were maintained by Indian princes in the late nineteenth century, one of them being Sajjan Niwas Bagh, created under the royal patronage of a Hindu prince of Udaipur in Rajasthan and later maintained by his successors. They were keen that the garden should have economic, educational, recreational and botanical value to the state.<sup>22</sup>

The *Purnans* and other texts speak about the value and significance of tree planting. The tree planting ceremony (*Vanamahotsa*) has a long history in the Hindu tradition. It is being revived now by certain temple organizations such as the Sri Venkateswara temple in Tirupathi in southern India, which offer tree saplings as *prasada* (blessed food) and invite donations to conserve the environment by the planting of trees. Such steps are being taken by the temples in diaspora such as the Balaji Venkateswara temple in Birmingham. The Hindu

reverence' for trees and plants has been based partly on utility, but mostly on religious duty and mythology. Hindu ancestors considered it their duty to save trees; and in order to do that they attached to every tree a religious sanctity' (Dwivedi 1990:206). Textual sources are clear that one should not exploit natural resources without any consideration for the environment. If one does, one is going against the ethical injunctions prescribed in the texts. *Ahimsa* (non-injury) is seen as the highest and the noblest form of dharma. It is one's duty to abstain from violence, and, where inevitable, violence should be minimal. The *Puranas* draw attention to the dire consequences (going to hell) for those who fail to plant trees. The *Arthashastra*, although motivated by economic rather than religious interests does not undermine the value of sacred trees, and in fact imposes fines on those who cause injury to plant and trees: 'For cutting off the tender sprouts of fruit trees, flower plants or shady trees in the parks near a city, a fine of 6 panas shall be imposed; for cutting off the minor branches of the same trees, 12 panas, and for the cutting of the big branches of the same tree, 24 panas shall be levied...'<sup>23</sup>

The emperors of old such as Ashoka (who embraced Buddhism), known for their love of nature and concern for the environment, planted banyan trees along the roads to give shade to people and animals as well as provided rest houses and watering facilities. The king's *dharma* came to be undermined during the colonial period. With the loss of political authority under the colonial rule, and with the introduction of new land reforms and the emergence of a market-oriented economy, the traditional role of the king/state as the protector of resources and his people had little value. However, we have some contemporary examples of model environmentalists such as Vansh Pradip Singh, a twentieth century ruler of Sawar in North India who is known for his kingly duty (*rajadharma*) of caring for the environment.<sup>24</sup>

There are also clear injunctions against polluting land, air and water, but whether they are put into practice is another matter. However, texts clearly warn against disposal of waste into sacred rivers such as the Ganges: 'One should not perform these 14 acts near the holy waters of the river Ganga: i.e., remove excrement, brushing and gargling, removing cerumen from body, throwing hairs, dry garlands,... washing clothes, throwing dirty clothes, thumping water and swimming (Parvacitta Tatva 1.535).<sup>25</sup> The point is that one is not supposed to wash oneself in sacred rivers but to have a holy dip. It is ironic that those who profess faith in the cleansing power of the sacred rivers tend to pollute it.

To sum up, the 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, duty) prevails; 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.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Thapar, R., *Early India: From the Origins to AD 1300*. London: Allan Lane, 2002: 145.

<sup>2</sup> For a description of different kinds of cities/towns, see Sachdev, Vibhuti and Tillotson, Giles, *Building Jaipur: The Making of an Indian City*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002: 13.

<sup>3</sup> Thapar: 344-45.

<sup>4</sup> See Bajaj, A.K. and Srinivas, M.D. 'Annam Bahu Kurvita: The Indian Tradition of Growing and Sharing Food', *Manushi*, noose 92-93, January-April, 1996: 16-20.

<sup>5</sup> Thapar 2002: 302.

<sup>6</sup> A.K. Ramanujan, 'Towards an Anthology of City Images' in Vinay Dharwadker (ed.) *The Collected Essays of A.K. Ramanujan*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006: 54 & 68.

<sup>7</sup> Guruge, Ananda, *The Society of Ramayana*. Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1991: 91-95.

<sup>8</sup> Each of these goals became the subject matter of separate treatises. For example, *Dharmashastras* are primarily concerned with the science of *dharma* (sacred law), *Arthashastra* with the science of material gain, and *Kamasutra* with the science of love, and *Upanishads* (metaphysical speculations) with the final goal, *moksha*, liberation from the cycle of *samsara*.

<sup>9</sup> Benares was a prosperous trading centre and was known for its fabulous wealth which attracted the attention of foreign visitors, historians and British colonialists.

<sup>10</sup> Eck, Diana, L., *Banaras: City of Light*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990: 3

<sup>11</sup> Eck: 283-84.

<sup>12</sup> See Guruge: 90.

<sup>13</sup> See Guruge: 90.

<sup>14</sup> Ramanujan: 69-70.

<sup>15</sup> Reddy, Venkataramana, G., 'Town Planning in Ancient India'. Paper read at the 15th the Town and Country Planning Seminar, Bhubaneshwar, 1966: 4.

<sup>16</sup> Although the essential form of the *Vastu Purusha Mandala* is square, 'it can be converted into a triangle, hexagon, octagon and circle of equal areas and retain its symbolism' Kramirsch, Stella, *The Hindu Temple, vol. I*. Calcutta: University of Calcutta., 1946: 21. (For further explanation of the *Vastu Purusha Mandala*, see Kramirsch: 7).

<sup>17</sup> Sachdev and Tillotson 2002: 29.

<sup>18</sup> See McGee, Mary, 'State Responsibility for Environmental Management: Perspective from Hindu Texts on Polity' in Christopher Key Chapple and Mary Evelyn Tucker (eds.) *Hinduism and Ecology: The Intersection of Earth, Sky, and Water*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001: 63.

<sup>19</sup> Panikkar, R., *The Vedic Experience: Mantramanjari*. Pondicherry: All India Books, 1989: 124 & 125

<sup>20</sup> McGee: 72.

<sup>21</sup> See Kramirsch: 4.

<sup>22</sup> Bowe, Patrick, 'The Indian Gardening Tradition and the Sajjan Niwas Bagh, Udaipur', in *Garden History*, vol. 27 (2), 1999: 194-202.

<sup>23</sup> Shamasastri (trans.), Kautilya's *Arthashastra*. Mysore: Mysore Printing and Publishing House, 1997: 225.

<sup>24</sup> For a detailed account of the part played by Vansh Pradip Singh in the care of the environment, see Gold, Ann Grodzins (2001) "'If You Cut a Branch You Cut My Finger": Court, Forest, and Environmental Ethics in Rajasthan' in Christopher Key Chapple and Mary Evelyn Tucker (eds.)

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*Hinduism and Ecology: Intersection of Earth, Sky, and Water*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001: 317-336. For an informative and critical treatment of Hindu attitudes to the environment, see the chapters in *Hinduism and Ecology* by Christopher Key Chapple and Mary Evelyn Tucker.

<sup>25</sup> Dwivedi, O.P., 'Satyagraha for Conservation: Awakening the Spirit of Hinduism' in J.R. Engel and J.G. Engel (eds.) *Ethics of Environment and Development Global Challenge and International Response*. Tuscon: University of Arizona Press, 1990: 207.