

What makes a 'Good City'?

A Sikh Perspective

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Introduction

The word 'city' has different connotations in different countries and societies but generally refers to an urban settlement with a sizeable population. This urbanisation of the world's population has increased rapidly in the last hundred years or so, with 13% (220 million) of the world's population living in urban environments in 1900, 29% (732 million) in 1950, and rising to 49% (3.2 billion) in 2005. This figure is likely to rise to 60% (4.9 billion) by 2030¹. With such high densities of populations living closely together there is now, more than ever, a great need for cities to function effectively where people of different backgrounds can prosper and live together in harmony. This paper discusses the concept of a 'good city' from the perspective of the Sikh faith and outlines various parameters required for a Sikh good city model. The Sikh holy text, *the Guru Granth Sahib (GGS)*, does not contain a complete prescription for a good or ideal city. The Sikh Gurus were more concerned with the qualities and attributes of the ruler of states and kingdoms. There are however various references about societies, towns and cities in the Sikh holy texts and this paper will attempt to use these source references as a foundation for the principles of a good city. Further, a number of the Sikh Gurus (founders of the Sikh faith) set up cities, or communities of believers, during their lifetimes and these will be examined to provide indicators for the Sikh ideals of a good city.

The role and purpose of cities has changed throughout history. Originally urban settlements were set up to protect against invasion and poverty but eventually expanded into areas of trade, crafts and politics. Much later, as a consequence of industrial revolution, factories were built in cities and the demand for labour and increased commercial activity attracted people from rural areas looking for better opportunities in cities. The aftermath of world war two has seen the biggest rise in urban populations mirroring the growth in the global economy. For many, cities are seen as places of human advancement in terms of economic growth, technological advances and development of culture but for many countries the basic necessities of life such as clean water and sanitation still remain targets for vast swathes of urban populations. Cities in all countries also have problems with homelessness, crime, pollution, overcrowding etc.

The City of God

The good city model can not be a static one but must be dynamic enough to respond to factors of time, population needs and circumstances. If it does not, it will invariably fail. Obviously, there are certain key elements that must be ingrained in to the model which will remain fixed. The concept of equality, justice, truthful living and diversity are key Sikh values which these key elements can be based upon, these are discussed later. However, for Sikhs, there is one fundamental parameter that must be imbibed in the good city model which will form bedrock of any good city. This is the concept of the city of the divine, spirituality and God must be at its heart. In other words the good city becomes the city of God. As Guru Arjan, the fifth guru of the Sikh states:

Where the Naam, the Name of my Lord of the Universe is not chanted-
those towns are like the barren wilderness.

GGs, p105

The God-centred person (*Gurmukh*) is a recurrent theme in Sikhism, and the 'divine city' is often used in a metaphorical context to describe a state of being or mind. This does not mean that we shouldn't translate these ideas from the micro (person) perspective to the macro (society) perspective. Guru Arjun, the fifth guru of the Sikh faith, uses this metaphorical language, to describe his state of transcendental enlightenment by comparing it to a 'divine city':

When the five virtues were reconciled, and the five passions were
estranged, I enshrined the five within myself, and cast out the other
five.
In this way, the village of my body became inhabited, O my Siblings of
Destiny.
Vice departed, and the Guru's spiritual wisdom was implanted within
me.
The fence of true Dharmic religion has been built around it.
The spiritual wisdom and reflective meditation of the Guru has
become its strong gate.
So plant the seed of the Naam, the Name of the Lord, O friends, O
Siblings of Destiny.
Deal only in the constant service of the Guru.
With intuitive peace and happiness, all the shops are filled.
The Banker and the dealers dwell in the same place.
There is no tax on non-believers, nor any fines or taxes at death.
The True Guru has set the Seal of the Primal Lord upon these goods.
So load the merchandise of the Naam, and set sail with your cargo.
Earn your profit, as Gurmukh, and you shall return to your own home.
The True Guru is the Banker, and His Sikhs are the traders.

Their merchandise is the Naam, and meditation on the True Lord is their account.
One who serves the True Guru dwells in this house.
O Nanak, the Divine City is eternal.

GGs, p. 430

The concepts used in this verse, although centred on the advancement of an individual contain a latent message for humanity and can be extrapolated to derive attributes for a 'good' city. Guru Arjun is reiterating that a divine city must be 'God - centred' fostering a sense of spiritual need rather than material need on the part of its citizens. City rulers must provide an environment which does not hinder the individual's right to connect with God. In turn, spiritual practice is not to be seen simply as one slot in an individual's life but must be promoted as the practice of life itself.

Guru Arjun also defined the concept of a welfare state, called *halemi raj*, a society ruled by benevolence and in which truth forms the core of all activity. In a speech on the 400th anniversary of installation of the Sri Guru Granth Sahib, the Prime Minister of India, Dr Manmohan Singh stated²:

This concept of Halimi Raj as described in the Guru Granth Sahib resembles, in some ways, the modern ideal of a welfare state. Such a society is not defined or created by state directives or legislation but is the result of a spiritual transformation of all its constituents.

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.

GGs, 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

Thus a good city is one that has the goal of providing full employment so that its citizens are able to fulfil the dual requirements of an honest and charitable life which are in turn, spiritual exercises in themselves. The institution of *langar* represents the need to break down the barriers between people of all backgrounds particularly between the privileged and less privileged. One example of how this could be carried out in practice is for urban planners to ensure that newly built housing estates have a good mix all types of housing, catering for people from all walks of life, and to prohibit the development of so called 'gated' areas in which the relatively wealthy segregate themselves from the less privileged members of society, and which inevitably leads to a fracture in society. A flourishing mixed community should be the objective of any planning proposal. *Langar* also epitomizes the need to support the voluntary sector. Citizens should be given every support to devote some of their private time to help with under-resourced activities or at city institutions where their skills and abilities could be utilized to improve services. This could include helping the elderly, sitting on a school governing board, working in a hospice etc.

Urban Decay

One of the major problems for the modern city is crime and violence, which one may argue is systematic of a materialistic society but equally is also

brought on by the addiction to drugs particularly by the young in poorer communities. This results in a fearful and apprehensive society and also a section of society which descend into a spiral of crime and drugs and wasted lives. Sikhs view the decline of spiritual awareness and hunger as the cause of many of these problems and indeed therein lies the solution. Anger, greed, addiction etc are wounds of the soul that can be repaired with spiritual endeavour:

Chant the Name of the Lord, Har, Har, O my Siblings of Destiny.
All sickness and sin shall be erased; your mind shall be rid of the
darkness of ignorance.

GGs, p. 1339

The challenge for the good city would be firstly to create a more equitable society with opportunities for all and in which citizens are spiritually greedy rather than materially so. Secondly, in the spirit of seva, the ordinary citizens of the good city would be challenged to work with less fortunate citizens and those trapped in crime and addiction on educational and rehabilitation programmes. Thirdly, urban regeneration should not just be about cleaning streets, building new shopping complexes and houses but also about regeneration of the human spirit.

Leadership

The citizens of the good city will play a vital role in its proper functioning and success. However, every successful organisation has a skilled and able leadership team and this is no different for a city. For Sikhs, leaders should be imbued with the qualities of humility and selflessness. They should be servants of the people prepared to work tirelessly for the betterment of society. The GGS elucidates the qualities of a leader:

Only he should sit on the throne, who is worthy of it
And who has realised the Guru's word and silenced the five desires
(lust, anger, greed, attachment and ego).

A.G., p. 1039

Thus, city leaders must be God centred people, who strive to maintain the highest moral standards and who wish to carry out their duties, not for ambition, wealth and power, but for a real desire to serve the people.

Architecture and Planning

The architecture of a city, its layout and environment shape our thought processes and should be a reflection of the ethos and spirit of the city. In

Sikhism there is a perfect example of how architecture can represent the qualities and ideals of a community and which can be extended to urban planning for the good city. This of course is the Sri Harandir Sahib or the Golden Temple as it is commonly known³. It symbolises a synthesis of styles but ultimately has a style of its own. This represents the eclectic nature of the Sikh faith and the bringing together of people from all faiths under the umbrella of the oneness of God. A cause way leads the worshipper from the entrance gate of the Golden Temple complex to the sanctum sanctorum of the temple and denotes the bridge between worldly and spiritual affairs. The holy shrine is kept at a lower level than the surrounding buildings symbolising humility, an example to the leadership of a good city. The temple structure stands within a pool of water which gives out the effect of peace, serenity and contemplation, a cue for providing attractive public spaces in a good city. The temple itself has four entrances signifying that, like a good city, it is open to all without distinction. At the core of the temple is the sacred scripture and its recitation resonates outwards to all who wish to hear.

Conclusions

The good city is a city that meets the needs of all its citizens. It is not a static or constant model but changes with time, progress and circumstance. For Sikhs, there are however some key components for a good city which will stand the test of time and therefore should be somehow ingrained in the constitution of the city. The city must be a beacon of truth and justice and incorporate the ideals of equality, diversity and selfless service (*seva*). Employment opportunities, education and public services must be accessible to all. Most importantly, for Sikhs the good city represents a paradigm for the city of God. God's kingdom does not just exist in a realm outside the reality in which we live but exists right here on Earth, and without spiritual endeavour, the concept of the good city will be in vain. Political office and servitude in the good city must be inspired by a God centred approach. The good city will be a city with a hallowed personality.

Notes

¹ [World Urbanization Prospects: The 2005 Revision](#), Population Division, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, UN

² <http://pib.nic.in/release/release.asp?relid=13019>. Prime Minister's inaugural address on the 400th anniversary of installation of the Sri Guru Granth Sahib, Prime Minister's Office (India), 2005.

³ Singh PB, Verma DK, Ghai RK and Singh G (Eds), Golden Temple, 1999, Publications Bureau, Punjabi University, Patiala.