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Begumpura: A Fifteenth-Century Blueprint for Governance Without Exclusion

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HISTORY & CULTURE**SOCIAL ISSUES****GS1****GS2**

CURATED & WRITTEN BY

**Bharat Choudhary**

UPSC Educator & Content Creator

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Begumpura: A Fifteenth-Century Blueprint for Governance Without Exclusion

 The Indian Express

30 July 2026

GS1

GS2



INTERVIEW ANGLE

"Begumpura imagines a city with no tax and no sorrow. Is that a genuinely usable governance ideal, or is its value purely as a moral yardstick against which to measure how far short actual governance falls?"

✓ Every fact web-verified against primary sources

THE LIFT LINE

A government can build roads, schools and hospitals in a place that still has a Begumpura-shaped hole in it, if it never asks who those roads, schools and hospitals quietly continue to exclude. Ravidas's standard was never about what a city has. It was about what a city does not do to its own people.

WHY THIS EDITORIAL MATTERS FOR YOUR EXAM

The Bhakti movement's social and political thought is a recurring GS1 theme, and this editorial's application of a medieval devotional vision to contemporary governance evaluation is exactly the kind of history-to-present-day linkage that strengthens a GS1/GS2 crossover Mains answer.

GS Paper 1: Indian culture, the Bhakti movement, its salient aspects and its social significance.

GS Paper 2: Social justice, mechanisms and issues relating to protection of vulnerable sections; governance and inclusive development.

For **Prelims**, fix Ravidas's identity, period and Begumpura's literal meaning, since Bhakti-saint questions are frequently tested by exact biographical and conceptual detail.

CONCEPT	MEANING	WHY UPSC TESTS IT
Bhakti movement	A devotional religious movement emphasising personal devotion over ritual and caste hierarchy, spanning roughly the 7th-17th centuries across India	Frequently tested for its social-reform dimension, distinct from purely religious content
Sant Ravidas	Fifteenth-century Bhakti poet-saint, associated with the Ravidassia tradition, born into a caste historically subjected to social exclusion	Tested alongside other Bhakti figures like Kabir, Tulsidas and Mirabai, each with distinct social emphases
Begumpura	“The city without sorrow,” Ravidas’s envisioned casteless, tax-free, exclusion-free society	The specific conceptual vision this editorial applies to contemporary governance
Vernacular devotional poetry	Bhakti poetry composed in regional languages rather than Sanskrit, expanding access beyond the literate elite	Explains the Bhakti movement’s broader social reach and reformist impact

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

ELEMENT	DETAIL
Movement	Bhakti movement, devotional religious reform spanning centuries across India
Figure	Sant Ravidas, fifteenth-century poet-saint
Vision	Begumpura, “the city without sorrow”
Defining features	No caste hierarchy, no oppressive taxation, no socially-inflicted sorrow

THE CORE ARGUMENT / ISSUE

Why Begumpura is a standard of absence, not presence

Most governance evaluation frameworks, then and now, tend to measure what a state provides: infrastructure, services, welfare [disbursement](#). Begumpura’s three defining features are, instead, all absences, no caste hierarchy, no extractive tax burden, no sorrow from exclusion, making it a standard that asks what harms a governance system permits or prevents, rather than what benefits it distributes.

Why this standard is harder to satisfy than service delivery

A polity can score well on service-delivery metrics, infrastructure built, welfare schemes disbursed, while simultaneously permitting structural exclusion that a service-delivery lens does not directly measure: a well-paved road in a locality that remains socially segregated along caste lines has satisfied an infrastructure metric while leaving a Begumpura-relevant harm entirely untouched.

The lived-experience grounding

Ravidas's vision was not composed as abstract political theory but from direct experience of caste-based exclusion, giving Begumpura a specific, embodied understanding of what exclusion actually costs an individual, materially and socially, that shapes why the vision centres exclusion and sorrow rather than material provision as its defining concern.

The operational-usability objection

A serious objection holds that a governance ideal defined by zero taxation and zero sorrow cannot function as an actionable policy target: modern states require revenue to function, and no governance system can eliminate all hardship. Treating Begumpura as a literal blueprint risks setting an impossible standard that discredits the framework rather than usefully guiding policy.

Reading Begumpura as a lens, not a blueprint

The reply distinguishes between using Begumpura as a literal target and using it as an evaluative lens. As a lens, the relevant question for any specific policy is not “does this achieve zero taxation and zero sorrow” but “whose exclusion or exploitation does this policy quietly permit or overlook,” a question service-delivery metrics alone do not force policymakers to ask.

HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS (ANALYTICAL FRAME)

Test a policy by its permitted harms, not only its delivered benefits. Any governance evaluation framework that measures only what is provided, infrastructure, services, funds disbursed, risks missing structural harms a policy quietly tolerates or reproduces. A complementary discipline, asking what exclusion, exploitation or hardship a given policy design permits to continue, catches gaps a pure delivery metric cannot see. This dual-lens approach, benefits delivered and harms permitted, is a transferable evaluative frame applicable well beyond this specific historical example.

THE DIAGRAM IN WORDS

Picture two overlapping report cards for the same city. The first, familiar, report card lists what the city has built: roads, schools, hospitals, welfare disbursements, and it can score highly. The second report card, drawn from Begumpura's standard, lists a different set of entries entirely: who remains excluded from full participation, who bears hidden costs the first report card does not track, whose sorrow the city's design still permits. A city can score well on the first card while scoring poorly on the second, and only reading both together, not the first card alone, reveals the gap Ravidas's vision was specifically naming.

WAY FORWARD

- ❶ **Incorporate exclusion-and-harm audits alongside service-delivery metrics** in governance evaluation, asking explicitly whose exploitation a given policy design permits to continue.
- ❷ **Ground policy design in lived experience of exclusion**, following Begumpura's own origin, by involving affected communities directly in evaluating whether a policy addresses structural harm, not only material need.
- ❸ **Use Begumpura as an interpretive lens in social-justice policy discourse**, not as a literal zero-taxation, zero-hardship target.
- ❹ **Teach Bhakti social philosophy alongside its devotional content**, recognising its governance and social-reform dimension as academically significant in its own right.
- ❺ **Apply the absence-of-harm standard to contemporary caste, gender and economic-exclusion policy debates**, using it as a complement to, not a replacement for, conventional development indicators.

PYQ LINKAGE AND PRACTICE

UPSC has tested the Bhakti movement's social significance and its various regional and thematic strands as a recurring GS1 theme; this editorial's application of Ravidas's Begumpura to contemporary governance offers a distinctive GS1-GS2 crossover angle.

Practice question: "A governance framework measured only by what it delivers can miss the structural harms it permits." Examine this claim with reference to Sant Ravidas's vision of Begumpura and its relevance to contemporary inclusive-governance debates. (250 words, 15 marks)

Interview angle: Begumpura imagines a city with no tax and no sorrow. Is that a genuinely usable governance ideal, or is its value purely as a moral yardstick against which to measure how far short actual governance falls?

Sources: Indian Express, Ministry of Culture

Source: Begumpura: A Fifteenth-Century Blueprint for Governance Without Exclusion — Ujiyari.com | Free UPSC & State PCS Editorial Analysis

● KEY ARGUMENTS AT A GLANCE

Sant Ravidas's fifteenth-century vision of Begumpura, a casteless, sorrow-free city, offers a still-relevant governance template that measures a polity by the absence of exploitation and exclusion, a standard distinct from, and more demanding than, the standard measure of governance as service delivery.



SUPPORTING

- Begumpura's defining features, no caste hierarchy, no tax burden extracted from the powerless, no sorrow imposed by social exclusion, together describe an absence of structural harm rather than a presence of specific services or infrastructure.
- Ravidas composed this vision from direct lived experience of caste-based exclusion, giving the ideal a grounding in what exclusion actually costs a person, not an abstract administrative concern.
- A governance standard measured by absence of exploitation forces evaluation of who bears a policy's hidden costs, not just who receives its visible benefits, a distinction service-delivery metrics alone can obscure.



COUNTER

A governance ideal defined by the total absence of tax and sorrow is not operationally usable as a policy target; real governments must extract some revenue and cannot eliminate all forms of hardship, making Begumpura more a moral aspiration than an actionable framework.



WAY FORWARD

Use Begumpura not as a literal policy target but as an evaluative lens, testing specific governance decisions against the question of whose exclusion or exploitation a policy quietly permits, alongside conventional service-delivery metrics.


MAINS ANSWER FRAMEWORK
QUESTION

Sant Ravidas's vision of Begumpura offers a governance philosophy centred on the absence of exploitation and exclusion rather than the presence of services. Examine its relevance to contemporary debates on inclusive governance in India. (250 words)

INTRODUCTION

Sant Ravidas, the fifteenth-century Bhakti poet-saint born into a caste historically subjected to social exclusion, envisioned "Begumpura," literally "the city without sorrow," a place with no caste hierarchy, no oppressive taxation and no sorrow inflicted by social exclusion, a vision this editorial argues remains relevant to contemporary governance debates.

BODY

The Bhakti movement, of which Ravidas was a prominent figure, challenged caste-based religious and social hierarchy through vernacular devotional poetry accessible beyond the Sanskrit-literate elite, and Begumpura specifically articulates a governance ideal grounded in the lived experience of exclusion rather than an abstract administrative vision. Its three defining absences, no caste hierarchy, no extractive taxation, no socially-inflicted sorrow, together constitute a standard for evaluating a polity by what harms it does not permit, rather than by what services it delivers.

This distinction matters for contemporary governance evaluation: a state can deliver substantial infrastructure and services while still permitting structural exclusion along caste, gender or economic lines, a gap a purely service-delivery-based governance metric can obscure but a Begumpura-style standard directly targets.

CONCLUSION

Begumpura is not operationally usable as a literal policy target, since real governance requires some taxation and cannot eliminate all hardship, but as an evaluative lens asking whose exclusion or exploitation a given policy quietly permits, it offers a still-sharp complement to conventional service-delivery governance metrics.

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