

Getting out...

In the past 7 years I have had the opportunity to travel to ~40 Indian cities (some repeatedly) spread across 24 states & union territories. To my benefit, these travels were not confined to modern, emerging metros like Gurgaon, Chennai & Hyderabad but also included relatively *un-glitzy* cities like Ahmedabad & Kolkata. I travelled to Patna and Rajgir in the state of Bihar, a region dreaded by travellers until recently. I spent time in Mahabalipuram, Amritsar, Jaipur & Agra, cities with much old-world charm and also visited industrial towns in Valsad, Gujarat. These experiences have been pivotal in developing my understanding of the Indian landscape. I elaborate on some of my takeaways below.

...of the ivory tower

The biggest take-away from my travels has been the importance of getting out - it has either strengthened or altered some of my most fundamental views. The experience has made me realize that modern day offices serve as ivory towers - they are a great place to study, research, process and facilitate but can isolate you from the realities outside if you remain confined to them. In fact, I now question whether many of the pundits who write opinionated articles on India in news journals, and preach their market outlooks on business channels have balanced the insights they

have gained sitting in offices in New York, Singapore or Mumbai, with real world experiences on the ground. The world looks different from a rickshaw shared by 12 than the backseat of a luxury sedan. Getting out of the ivory tower is vital to comprehend the remaining 99% of India. It supports one's understanding of how most people work, earn, behave, think & live. It helps one assess what unites otherwise disparate communities; it allows one to see whether people across regions are aspirational and optimistic or otherwise. It moderates a bull's view on how India will look in a decade and uplifts a bear's view. It helps identify where the stressed plates of the system lie. Such sometimes oversimplified observations, maybe impossible to quantify but are often the most essential to comprehend in a landscape which is anything but homogenous.

Unnatural nation - a hundred countries in one

In 1888, when British rule was well entrenched in India, Sir John Strachey wrote that India was merely a label of convenience given to a great multitude of countries. In his view, the differences between the countries of Europe were much smaller than those between the 'countries' of India. 'Scotland is more like Spain than Bengal is like the Punjab'. 130 years later, 70 years of which India has thrived as a nation, the underlying cultural and social differences between regions

remain while economic and class disparity are fast eroding. I had the opportunity to watch youngsters 'hang out' in trains or malls in each city. They looked incredibly similar with chic jeans, cool T-shirts, trendy sneakers and touch-screen phones. However, the languages in which they spoke and the ways in which they interacted differentiated them. If you put them together they would find each other to be alike, until they interacted. They would realize that each of them is expressing individuality in remarkably similar ways. The feeling of a nation and the ability to relate to each other is emphasized by what is being sold to us, whether it's the bollywood music playing in the background or the Levis jeans one just bought.

Seeing things from the other person's perspective

Another crucial insight is the importance of seeing things through others' perspectives, as Dale Carnegie put it. In a nation with so many conflicting interests and vastly diverse affiliations, it is crucial to recognize that a consensus on any issue would be a miracle. I saw a group of army officers nap on the dirty floor of a dilapidated train station as mosquitos feasted on them while jet-setters sipped mochas and sank into lounge chairs at the airport. It is easy to see how this doesn't settle well with some - explaining the subtleties of such contradictions will not be a seamless task.

I invite your comments (soumil@dmzpartners.in)



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