

**India's holy cities**

Varanasi is a fascinating place to visit - long recognized as India's holy city, foreign tourists have flocked here to try to comprehend the cultural subtleties of Indian society and tradition and attempt to capture these experiences through their DSLRs. For someone visiting from within the country, I was as fascinated. Cities like Varanasi and Haridwar help remind me of a key characteristic that the vast majority of our populace possesses - faith. As a capital allocator visiting the city where millions come to die this is particularly interesting! On a more practical level, these cities are also a full-fledged assault on the senses - the decibel level and exhaust inhaled during the rickshaw ride to Varanasi's *Manikarnika Ghat* makes Mumbai's streets seem tranquil.

**Authentic, at a cost...**

Varanasi and Haridwar are situated on the banks of the Ganges. Unlike many Indian cities which have an interesting balance between the old and the new, these two cities are decidedly fixated on life as it used to be. It is difficult to spot many signs of modernity here. A large part of the original character of these cities seems to still persist. There are two sides to this, in my view - one which calls for celebration, the other for much concern. First, it's always nice to see signs of authenticity - traits difficult for another place to replicate. These

are authentic cities - there is very little (or nothing) generic about them - the temples along the *ghats*, the scenes from the boats along the *Ganga* are unmistakable and irreplaceable. On the flipside, certain age-old customs which are detrimental to our long-term progress persist here. While the evening *arti* has gained much tourist popularity, Varanasi's large and abandoned widow population is still a part of this city's unfortunate underbelly.

**Immense optimism in the city of death**

At the end of a long hot day walking through alleys, I would sit down at a restaurant along *Assi Ghat* for a cool drink. Varanasi is a city I would like to visit repeatedly. *Assi Ghat* is full of quaint book shops, cafes, small restaurants and cultural processions. In surprising juxtaposition, this is just a stone's throw away from *Harishchandra Ghat* where Hindu cremations are perpetually underway. I was fortunate to visit during a local dance festival which was ongoing in the background. As I spoke to a few locals, I was impressed to find out that the paths we were walking on, were until a couple months invisible because of the mounds of muck, and garbage that had piled up hiding the pathway below. I'm told that the Modi government had brought a real push to clean up. Many local vendors were listening in to PM Modi's address over the radio. The general optimistic mood among locals got me thinking about my own wish-list for

the country. I narrowed it down to two aspects that could go a long way in improving the way of life for millions (and perhaps well beyond the capacity of any one government to change) - one, the emergence of greater rationality, and two, an increase in the level of productivity (the later I have already elaborated on at multiple occasions).

**The emergence of rationality**

For years many Indians (especially outside cities) have had to use non-rational justifications for decision-making - whether a professional or a marital choice! I hope over time that societies and communities embrace rationality over pseudo-scientific explanations or familial pressures as excuses to make inferior choices. Further, people who choose rationality to guide their decisions over what is simply customary should not have to operate along the fringes. Perhaps evidence that "this is how it always has been done" simply does not work anymore will allow more people to confidently deploy 'reason' and retire 'custom'. Cleansing irrational dogma will prove as important as cleaning the streets of *Bharat*. I also continue to hope that systems (cities, government departments etc.) are refreshed to leverage (rather than nullify) the efforts of our immensely hard working populace.

**I invite your comments** ([soumil@dmzpartners.in](mailto:soumil@dmzpartners.in))



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