

Quick snapshot of my visit

I recently visited Patna, which the World Bank ranked 2nd in India (after Delhi) for the ease in starting a business. Having read about the transformation taking place in the state, I found it worthwhile to visit today so that I may compare the changes years from now during future visits. I also took the opportunity to drive through the countryside and visit the ruins of Nalanda, an ancient centre of higher learning.

So much that doesn't tally

At the end of day two in Patna, as I sat down to compile notes, one of the key themes, I thought, was how things in Patna 'don't tally'. One sub-consciously assumes that when some things are present in a city, other supplemental aspects are given. Not in Patna. The airport is archaic yet air traffic is bustling; roads are being widened and expressways are being built yet cars, trucks, rickshaws, hand carts, cows, and people compete for road space like in no other city; the one mall in town makes you feel like you could be in any major Indian metro when you're inside, yet there are no prominent hotel chains on the outside; Mercedes busses ferry political guests across the city yet residents depend on British-era rickshaws and buses which carry five times the people they are meant to; you could be sipping a latte at a cafe coffee day but would need to go on a treasure

hunt to find a clean meal in most zip codes of the city; there are Volkswagen and Toyota dealerships on the outskirts yet there aren't any such cars on the streets; BMW advertises the 'joy of driving' along the elevated expressways yet there are certainly no BMWs; the number of educational adverts, institutions and training classes exceeded those perhaps, in Ahmedabad, yet the city has one of the lowest civility standards (a *baraat* was blessed with gunfire in the air which apparently killed three bystanders during my visit); the hotel I stayed in offered dry-cleaning services but struggled with the concept of a clean bathroom.

A foot in the future, another in the past

My view on why so much doesn't tally there is that this is the transformational stage where the state has successfully thrown one foot in the future while the other languishes in the past. It is perhaps a matter of time until one follows the other with the support of good governance and improving literacy levels. How that world will look though, I am unsure of, given the dismal civility levels. One of the dominating themes of my visits to several cities was the progressive attitude of people. Lackadaisical attitudes are being displaced by enthused ones; aspirers are replacing detractors. Against this backdrop I was perpetually surprised by the ease with which people in Patna picked up spats.

Where productivity & civility come to die

Two busses looking to merge in at a junction vehemently prevented each other from passing first. Drivers de-boarded to pick a fight which lasted 15 minutes for a situation which wouldn't have arisen if one driver would have waited 15 seconds. On my return from Nalanda, I witnessed a quarrel which had come down to both sides throwing sticks over disagreement on a deal at the ensuing bull auction. I was glad my chauffer stopped the car so that we could satiate our curiosity for a minute, but was completely amazed when he deciphered what was going on and picked a side! I saw 8 labourers pushing a stack of cables on a cart up a bridge using implements which were not too different from those displayed at the Nalanda museum as exhibits of a different time. This reminded me of how a large labour pool is only one component of economic growth, the other one being productivity.

Looking at things from others' perspective

The world looks different in a rickshaw ferrying 12 (8 in cabin, 4 outside). I realized the importance of looking at things from others' perspective. It began to occur to me how difficult Dr. Manmohan Singh's job really is. With such varying vantage-points, making the disagreeable agree will take time.

I invite your comments (soumil@dmzpartners.in)



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