

Quick snapshot of my visit

I visited Lucknow for a variety of purposes, one of which was to take a look around the administrative hub of the most populous state in India. I also took the opportunity to take a train from Lucknow to Raebareli to get a feel for the local way of life.

Experiencing the complete lack of civility

The flight to Lucknow provided a glimpse on civility levels. The tail end of the plane was engulfed in a fetid smell emanating from the restroom after a passenger left soiled toilet paper in a corner. When the stewardess advised a young group to dispose waste appropriately they chided her for having to pay for snacks and one passenger started filming her as she walked away. The passenger directly behind my seat got comfortable by resting his legs on my armrests and was rather offended that I had an issue with that. Someone from a rowdy group decided to play loud *bhojpuri* music with a mobile phone, awakening a few napping passengers in close range. Unlike my earlier travel experiences, this time the flight attendants did not seem even slightly flummoxed by the behaviour and were in fact disciplinary towards the boisterous group.

When will this change?

Upon witnessing this complete dearth of courtesy, at first I had the obvious thought that wealth had preceded education in many households. I also

deduced that this will not change for a very long time. If you want to be insulated from such experiences you will be forced to restrict yourself to flying first class, living in gated communities or not stepping out of your metro-city bubbles. Alternatively you could choose to invest here but spend a large percentage of your time elsewhere.

Why is it so?

I decided to take a train ride from Lucknow to Raebareli which helped put things in context. I learned as I moved on that all the acts after reaching the station would have to be pursued with, at best, aggression, and at worst, brute force. From preventing others from jutting in while I bought my Rs. 29 general class ticket to take me 80 km away, to evading bitter squabbles with others standing in the enquiry line, to pushing and shoving to get onto the train before it had even come to a halt and before people had de-boarded, to nonchalantly pushing someone's legs off an unoccupied seat in order to get a place to sit, to finally making sure you get off the train before anyone can get on just as soon as it comes to a halt, every action permeated aggression. If I were accustomed to do this on a daily basis, I wouldn't behave any differently 30,000 feet above ground. My instinct would have incorporated my need to push, shove, and argue to get where I wanted. To pursue the flight analogy, a snake charmer

dropping his snake in my compartment served as the on-board entertainment! This made me realize that civility levels are tightly linked not just to education but also to infrastructure. The lack of civility is a function of not having any exposure to a safe, civil and comfortable way to travel, and for that matter, live.

A city which highlights unproductive use of capital

The state has one of the lowest development levels but yet the city is host to several 'parks' including one with marble flooring covering the size of probably a few football fields with bronze statues of erstwhile leaders, several domes and pyramids, and hundreds of elephant statues. Standing atop a dome, I felt like I was in a bustling Roman civilization. For UP to be erecting such grand parks seems appalling. Constructing a park only has a one-time effect on GDP and serves as a sink in the long-run. The taxpayer money could have been effectively deployed to build infrastructure to encourage private capital to move to UP and have a more lasting and ongoing impact on employment and GDP. The fact that our populace elects such leaders sometimes makes me wonder what the value of our democracy is over the authoritarian ways of other fast-growing countries. How can an illiterate patient prescribe medicines for himself?

I invite your comments (soumil@dmzpartners.in)



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