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Improbably Incredible India!

The evening winter mist mixed with the thick layer of pollution to create a surreal effect as we inched down Delhi's ring road a few weeks ago. I was recently in India for a cousin's wedding; since I had last visited 2 years prior, much had ostensibly changed. There were a dozen new flyovers scattered throughout the city, the roads had been widened, lanes had been thickly painted, and several new stadiums constructed for the 2010 Commonwealth Games towered over slums. None of these new developments, not even the extensive, shiny, and much lauded metro system, had done much to ease the traffic, however. To my right, three young men, each clad in matching faux leather jackets, rode Hero Honda motorcycles. To the left was one of Delhi's ubiquitous green and yellow three-wheeler autorickshaws, its front dash stuffed with pictures and statues of Hindu gods. And next to that was a sleek BMW 7 series with the windows darkly tinted such that the only visible occupant was the uniformed driver. In the midst of the jam, a carriage, drawn by two white horses and carrying a groom, cut horizontally across the traffic. The groom was clad in a white sherwani, an ornate Indian suit of sorts worn by many men on their wedding day. Surrounding him was his dancing bharat, casting some sweet bhangra moves to the heavy bass emitted by an accompanying band's drums. Taking advantage of the break in the traffic, two emaciated boys ran onto the street, barefoot, hawking tissue boxes and magazines featuring Bollywood's hottest stars. One of the boys, certainly no older than 14 and no taller than 5 feet, with a dark complexion

stemming no doubt from hours working under the sun, came up to me and tapped on my window. He said something in Hindi which roughly translates to “look at the pretty girls – buy the magazine – only RS 50.” I instinctively emulated my relatives’ mannerisms and tersely shook my head before staring blankly ahead. The boy eventually gave up and moved on. The green light flashed ahead of us and instantly the honking picked up. We jolted forward, plunging into the mist as we went.

Delhi roads serve as a good metaphor for India itself. The roads are overpopulated and over flowing with cars, as the country is with people. The logical disconnect of having world-class 10 lane orange-railed flyovers funnel into two lane, poorly paved roads is all too representative of the disparity in development. The slow progress an ambulance makes through traffic, even with its siren blaring, marks the strides that remain necessary for basic healthcare. German-made luxury sedans, chauffeur driven, aggressively bullying smaller and cheaper vehicles parallels the way the rich leverage money and connections to put themselves above the law. And the comparisons go on. Summed up, Delhi roads are simply improbable. And so then too is India.

The country fits 3-4X the population of the United States into 1/3 the land mass. You do the math. Its government is run by a Sikh, a Muslim, a Hindu, and an Italian female Roman Catholic, all while India is almost 81% Hindu. The country has 28 states and 7 union territories, each one more or less representing distinct ethnic identities. The most popular native language, Hindi, is only spoken fluently by 41% of the population. And in stark contrast to many of its neighbors, India has operated as a democracy since its Independence in 1947.

The statistics are dizzying. And as a result, this time I left more confused than ever. But that wasn't the plan. Though I've been visiting relatives in Delhi every other year since I've been born, this was the first time that I set myself on the noble mission of possessing an understanding of what the country was all about. I was going to unearth, understand, and own a piece of my identity. Surely it was well within my means: after all, I'm ethnically Indian and have an experience-based appreciation for a lot of the traditions and cultures - that said, I was raised in a setting removed from India that maybe offers me some impartiality - I've been to India 10 or 11 times - and after four years at Harvard, I've taken some classes on India. Hell, I'm 21 years old - I'm an adult - I can legally drink. Yeah - I was ready.

But as I said, the more and more I learned and observed about India, the more improbable it seemed. In speaking to relatives and family friends in Delhi, I'm not entirely sure that the locals even understand how their country works. And to be sure, scholars may have come up with multitudes of theories as to what makes the nation tick, but there doesn't seem to be a consensus. In the face of all of this, I find myself turning towards an unexpected direction. Look - surely like all of you listening today - I'm not one to give up. I wanted to understand what turns Improbable India into Incredible India. I wanted to identify the underlying factors that lead to India's functionality - flag the potential pitfalls - I wanted to utilize my analytical drive.

But instead I'm increasingly comfortable with not being able to make sense of India's improbability. Call me a quitter, but I think it's because my vintrest in

India defies labels – its not wholly academic, or identity based, etc. rather it stems from the inside and is just a part of who I am. For that reason, I don't think I'll ever be satisfied with a list of attributes that make India what it is. I just sense that there's an intangible quality to what makes India tick. And so, in the true Indian way, I suppose I'll just have to accept that at least for now, “jo hai so hai” – What is, simply is.