

How I wrote this book?

The idea of writing this book was born during a 10-day visit to India in Oct / Nov 2016, to catch up with my friends at Mumbai and Delhi, and to attend a family wedding at Jammu. Before flying to Jammu, I stayed at Mumbai for two days. Except for the usual humidity, I enjoyed my stay at Mumbai. My friend lives on Marine Drive. The area is usually quite breezy and relatively much cleaner than the suburbs. At Jammu, I found many people were suffering from seasonal health issues, such as cough and viral fever.

At that time, Jammu had not received any rainfall for quite some time, so the dust and smoke levels were very high, and the suspended particulate matter in the air carried bacteria quickly from one person to the other. Normally, the Jammu air is much clearer than Delhi. A couple of days after the wedding, I also came down with low level fever, fatigue and a runny nose. With each day, my condition became worse. Two days before starting my return journey from Jammu, I started a course of antibiotics on the doctor's advice I needed a precautionary quick fix to control my symptoms before taking my international flight out of Delhi.

At noon of 4 November, I landed at Delhi. The visibility at the airport, and on the roads, was relatively much lower than normal, due to a smog that had been engulfing Delhi soon after the festival of Deepawali. Later it was found that the smog was due to a deliberate crop burning exercise in areas adjacent to Delhi. I was lucky that my flight was not cancelled or postponed, as had been happening on a regular basis at that time. Even the trains were running very late, some up to 24 hours.

The whole environment in Delhi was very depressing, especially for a visitor like me. The early afternoon sun resembled a yellow moon, warm but dull.

The Delhi residents seemed to be going about their business as usual. Although I felt sicker than before, I had to travel long distances in the national capital to meet various people. In the evening, I played badminton in an open air court with my friend, Mr Ashok Jain (my erstwhile employer in 1990), at his home in Green Park. The next morning, Mr Jain came down with fever, cough and a chest related issue. During the day, he and I went on a day-long, work-related trip within Delhi. During that trip, I wondered in disbelief how people lived and worked in Delhi. I was deeply worried about how Delhi would look like in the next 20 years. The idea of writing this book was born then.

In the evening, I flew out of Delhi and, thankfully, managed to reach Perth. I started writing this book on 25 November 2016.

When people don't listen, they must be given something to read and ponder over.

"Raise your words, not voice. It is rain that grows flowers, not thunder." (Rumi)

Chapter 1

White-anting Issues

1.0 INTRODUCTION

About eight years ago, the specialist doctor said softly, yet with firmness and confidence in his voice, "She has Stage 4 cancer. It has

spread out quite a bit in her body and it has also metastasised into her spine. As she is too weak to withstand any chemotherapy, there is not much that we can do.” He did not use any sweetener; perhaps there was no need to use one in such a situation. He must have been trained at medical school to tackle such situations effectively with such calmness—a quick sharp cut to minimise the pain and the bleeding!

I did not faint or cry, as this was not the place and time to be emotional and weak. I had to be pragmatic and, therefore, needed to quickly digest the diagnosis. Without a quiver in my voice, I asked him after a deathly pause of a few seconds, “How long?” He replied quickly, with a distinct firmness in his voice, “A maximum of six months!”

My second and the last query was, “Is there anything that we can do for her?” This time, he replied slowly, with a hint of empathy in his voice, “Keep her as comfortable as you possibly can. Take her home. You may try radiotherapy if you want to lessen the pain.”

The doctor’s meeting was quick; it lasted for just about 15 minutes, so it seemed. That woman was my mother. Post that final advice from the doctor, my father and I looked into each other’s eyes and decided to keep the news between us only. My mother never heard about her terminal condition till she died peacefully exactly a month later. She did not last for six months, as the doctor and we had hoped for.

What I am going to write in this book is about my other mother—my motherland—India. I am not an Indologist or anything; I am her son. So, given that we still have the time, if we can save her, let us do it.

This book is about the survival of future generations in India, to whom the current generation owes a moral, ethical and spiritual responsibility in looking after the sustainability of the country. This book is based on

my common observations about daily life in parts of India that I frequently visit.

As one of my friends said, after his recent trip to India, “Things look generally okay in India, but mostly above the eye level; however, when you take a look at the ground, it is a bit scary.”

Similar to the manner in which that doctor gave me that grave message, this book is intended to deliver a quick, sharp, and simple message, which even a middle school student should be able to understand. I don't want to limit the readership of this book to only the grown-ups, intellectuals and pseudo-intellectuals, many of whom will possibly judge this book and its author, based on the simplicity of its language or the author's political naivety.

I am conscious of the fact that, conceptually, simple is not considered to be cool in India; Indians like complexity—whether it is in written and spoken language, mundane issues, religion and spirituality, or designs of their clothes, houses or the main gate to their house.

In engineering design practice, it is the KISSrule that is generally followed for sustainability and longevity of a structure or a product, and for ease of its manufacture /construction and maintenance. But most Indians seem too oblivious of this golden rule. Complex is cool for them.

Albert Einstein once said, *“You do not really understand something unless you can explain it to your grandmother.”*

Very often, each one of us comes across people who try to avoid answering simple questions, saying, “Ah! It is a bit complicated, you can't understand it.” Sometimes, if you insist, such people may also just waffle around in answering very basic questions. In both such

cases, one can only conclude that the other person has nothing but a raw and half-baked understanding of the subject matter.

A 19th Century visionary, social reformer and Chancellor of Iran, Amir Kabir, said:

- *“If you plan for a year, then grow wheat. If you plan for ten years, then grow trees, but if you plan for 100 years, then educate people.”*
- *“When I was young, I believed a good country needs a wise king. In my middle years, I believed a good country needs a wise vazir (Prime Minister). But now I know a good country needs wise and educated people.”*

Amir said the second quote a few months before his exile, following which he is believed to have been murdered by the establishment. It is always the people who make or break a nation; a government or a great leader can only do so much. A country is as good as its people. Unless the people are sincere and work responsibly for the good of their fellow citizens and, therefore, their country, no force in the world can change the destiny and fortune of a nation.

Let us now come back to the case that I am trying to make.

- “What comprises a country?” A simple answer would be: “a land mass, with human and other natural resources thriving on it.”
- “How does a country survive?” A simple answer would be: “when her borders are protected, her citizens are physically and mentally healthy, and she has abundant and sustainable natural resources.”

All other things being equal, and keeping natural calamities and disasters out of the equation, a country will survive and progress only if her citizens are healthy and strong enough to look after not only themselves, but also their country’s borders, environment and

ecology; be able to effectively manage the country's natural resources; live a sustainable lifestyle; and leave their country in a better condition than what they had inherited.

1.1 WHY THIS BOOK?

I have been living outside India for more than 22 years but my roots are very much entrenched in India. Although I catch up with my father over the phone on a daily basis and my friends on a regular basis through popular social media, I visit India a number of times every year to catch up with my father, who lives at Jammu, and a number of my friends and relatives at Mumbai, Delhi and Srinagar (Kashmir).

“What is my problem then?” you may ask.

All overseas citizens and the NRIs who visit their home country on a regular basis understand the many challenges especially on the roads in India, during those short visits. For Indians living in India, it is just a way of life. Many may not even be aware of any better alternatives. They may not have many options but to simply accept the life as they see it and keep pressing on. In the course of fighting their life battles, sadly, many of them may not possibly know what lies ahead after just a few years!

“What is that common experience that you are talking about?” you may ask now. The answer is provided below.

I eagerly look forward to visiting India every now and then, albeit only on the good occasions. There have been unhappy times too in the past when I have had to make urgent trips to India, at very short notice, for example, to attend to my sick mother and then her funeral a number of years ago, followed by the funeral of my spiritual master a few years later and then my maternal uncle. At such times, when one

fighters one's internal demons, one should not have to fight the external demons too.

During those distressful and unhappy times, covering 12,000 km each way is itself an ordeal and a huge challenge for one, both physically and mentally. Unfortunately, the distress that I have experienced during those hard times has been exacerbated by increasingly difficult living conditions in India. I recall one such occasion when I had just landed at Jammu Airport. I was on my way home to see my ailing mother when my taxi met with an accident on a very busy road, for no fault of my driver. The other driver was speaking to someone on his mobile phone at the time of the accident. He was rough and loud, seemingly wealthy and bullish, and managed to attract a large crowd. He physically beat my driver and openly stole some money from my driver's wallet. I looked on helplessly from my passenger seat.

Interestingly, each time, after a few days of my stay in India, I eagerly look forward to returning to my home in Australia. Every time, without fail, on my return to Australia, after travelling for nearly 13 hours (or sometimes more), when I step outside the air conditioned Perth International Airport terminal building, I immediately take a deep breath of fresh air and look up towards a deep blue sky. A refreshing thought flashes quickly through my mind, "I am finally home, thank God, I can breathe now." Thereafter, I quickly walk to the designated taxi stand and greet the driver of a waiting taxi in the queue. Out of respect for the taxi driver, and to uphold the inherent human dignity and the dignity of labour, as most other fellow Australians do, I invariably sit in the front of the taxi, to the left of the driver. Well, there are those new (London Cab) design taxis in the town, which do not allow the passenger to sit in the front of the taxi, for security reasons, mainly the driver's security.

After fastening my seat belt, I invariably roll down the window, unless it is very hot outside, to allow the fresh air to come in and then constantly chat with my driver for the next half an hour till I reach

home. It is just like a happy catch-up chat with a friend, generally about the weather, politics and sports.

Coming back to India, it would be reasonable to consider my experiences and observations, and those of millions of other tourists, as a barometer of the country's health.

With each visit to India, I find living conditions becoming increasingly difficult in the country, with more people, traffic, noise, smoke, dust etc.

It makes me wonder, and extremely concerned, as to how the people will manage to live in the next 20 to 30 years, especially the children, when at present it so hard to:

- Find unpolluted air to breathe;
- Avoid contracting a range of debilitating mosquito borne diseases, such as malaria, dengue fever and chikungunya;
- Trust the quality of drinking water, both the tap water as well the commercially sold bottled water;
- Trust the quality of common alcoholic or non-alcoholic beverages being sold in India, including milk;
- Trust the quality of vegetables and fruits;
- Travel on the roads;
- Walk in the lanes and streets;
- Avoid serious airborne or waterborne diseases, such as typhoid and Hepatitis B;
- Avoid falling sick after eating commercially available food outside home; and
- Avoid dozes of antibiotics⁴ during a short stay in India or immediately after returning from India.

When I talk about India, I talk about India as a whole and not only her overly populated cities. About 70% of Indians live in villages; most are poor.

I recall in the seventies, when I was a young school going student, the sky used to look so blue and most people drank tap water. It was so easy to walk through the streets and move on the roads. Kids used to have plenty of playing areas around their house where they would play tennis-ball cricket, marbles or *gilli-danda*, or fly kites, depending upon the season of the year.

All those things now seem to be a beautiful memory from a distant world of the past. Now the sky looks pale bluish grey; streets and roads are full of pedestrians and vehicles; and kids have lost their playing areas to residential and commercial structures. In these past 40 years, the country has become more populated, technologically advanced, militarily stronger, but she has not progressed at all in terms of the basic requirements of life—air, water, food etc.

The quality of all these basic essentials of life has nosedived. People are indeed living longer, perhaps due to advances in medical science and medication; but can that be called living a life when most Indians, on an average, need to consume a course of antibiotics every month? I recall a famous dialogue spoken in a 70's movie (*MrNatwarlal*) by Indian iconic actor, Amitabh Bachchan, "*Arreyehjeenabhi koi jeenahai, Lallu?*" ("Can this life be called living a life, my dear?")

You may ask, "What is life other than what millions of Indians are living at the present?" In my view and in the view of millions of people like me worldwide, life does not mean just existence, consumption and procreation. For humans to claim to be different from other animals, such as chimpanzees and gorillas, living life is much beyond all these activities. There are over 7.4 billion people living on the planet as we speak and no two human beings are alike or think alike. The answer to the question "what defines life?" depends on who is asking. Each one of us sees this world differently, depending on our end conditions, and tries to make some sense out of it.

The definition of life is very individual specific. For a poor person in India, life may mean to be able to survive, make both ends meet and, with time, become rich and possess all known comforts of the world—a house, a car, electronic gadgets, expensive clothes, rich food and plenty of cash.

For a rich person, however, life may mean becoming richer and owning everything out there—properties and assets, land, people and become God, if possible.

For a spiritual person, though, life may mean pursuit of the truth and promoting oneness, peace and harmony amongst various life forms on the planet. For a philosopher, life may mean to contemplate and try to decipher what it is all about.

In the words of Thoreau:

“Most of the luxuries and many of the so-called comforts of life are not only not indispensable, but positive hindrances to the elevation of mankind.”

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