

WTF India



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Are We Losing the Plot?

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 juggernaut

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For Gayatri,

*You are six, and the world to you is still a place
of wonder – of colours, laughter and endless skies.*

*Every word here is a letter to your future. You
deserve streets that are safe, air that is clean and
a country that loves you back.*

May you grow into a nation rebuilt with hope.

All my love, always.



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Introduction



Let me tell you something about India. India is the only country in the world where a man can step over a dead body on his way to a yoga class, take a selfie with a cow blocking a six-lane highway, complain about corruption while bribing a traffic cop and then write a LinkedIn post about how India is the next superpower. All before breakfast. And not see anything remotely contradictory in any of it.

I love this country with a ferocity that frightens me. I was born here, educated here; I suffered here and celebrated here.

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I have watched this country go from a sleepy socialist republic, where importing a television set required the kind of paperwork normally reserved for nuclear treaties, to a digital, Mars mission-launching, G20-hosting, Chandrayaan-celebrating nation that the world now watches with a mixture of admiration and bewilderment.

And yet, every monsoon, Gurgaon – the supposed Silicon Valley of India, the gleaming corporate hub of the nation's capital – turns into Venice. Except Venice has the good sense to be beautiful. Gurgaon just becomes a giant, expensive, badly planned swimming pool. The story of Gurgaon is now a bigger story about our country – a country that is becoming unliveable for us, the middle class. Let me explain this in ten statements.

1. We Have a Rover on the Moon and a Crater on the Road Outside the Airport

Let that sit with you. The same civilization that successfully executed a Mars mission on a budget smaller than the catering bill for a Bollywood wedding cannot fill a pothole that has been there since the second United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government. We have scientists who can calculate the orbital trajectory of a spacecraft accurately. We have Public Works Department (PWD) contractors who cannot lay tarmac that survives one monsoon. Both things are true simultaneously. Both are celebrated. Only one of them should be.

2. Our Rivers Are Sewers, Our Sewers Are Roads and Our Roads Are Rivers – and We Have a Government Programme for Each

The Yamuna is a drain. Drains flood every July and roads become rivers. Meanwhile, the Ganga Action Plan (GAP), now in its fourth decade and nth iteration, continues to produce committees, conferences and commemorative plaques at a rate that bears no relationship whatsoever to the production of clean water. If the GAP was a student, it would have three PhDs, a tenured professorship and a river that is still on fire.

3. We Are the Only Country That Has Turned Bribery into a Customer Service Model

Sixty-six per cent of Indians have paid a bribe.¹ Not in some distant, corrupt past – now. Today. For services they have already paid for through their taxes. We have, in effect, created a subscription service with a compulsory tip. You pay the government for the service. You pay the agent to access the service. You pay the official to actually deliver the service. And then, if you are very lucky and the website is not down, you receive approximately 60 per cent of the service you originally requested and are told to come back next Tuesday for the rest. This is called public administration. In most countries, it is called extortion. We have simply formalized it.

4. Our Cities Flood Every July, and Every July, We Are Surprised

The monsoon occurs between June and September. It has done so for approximately 4,000 years. It is, arguably, the most predictable meteorological event on the planet. And yet, every single year, without fail, with the rhythmic reliability of a very depressing national tradition, our cities go underwater and our civic authorities react with the stunned disbelief of people who have never previously encountered rain. Gurgaon – home to the Indian headquarters of half the Fortune 500, the city of glass towers and luxury malls – becomes a lake. A very expensive lake in which Range Rovers stall, children are rescued by boats and men in suits wade to work while someone films them for Instagram. Every.

Single. Year. The only thing more astonishing than the flooding is our astonishment at the flooding.

5. We Have Made Air a Luxury Product

In Delhi, between October and February, breathing outdoors is a medical injury. Air quality index (AQI) regularly crosses 300 – the level at which the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) recommends that everyone, including the healthy and the young, avoid all outdoor physical activity. In Delhi, schools are open. Bars in Gurgaon are open. Construction sites are open. The only thing that closes is the pretence that anyone in authority considers this a problem requiring urgent action. The rich have bought air purifiers. The poor breathe

whatever is available. We have privatized oxygen. We have made clean air something you purchase rather than something you are entitled to as a citizen of a country that is theoretically governed by people who are theoretically accountable to you. If you had told someone in 1947 that seventy-eight years after independence, the capital city's middle class would be purchasing machines to make the air in their bedrooms breathable, they would have assumed you were describing a dystopian novel. You are describing a Tuesday.

6. Our Bridges Fall and the Enquiry Committee Outlives the Bridge

One hundred and seventy bridges collapsed in India between 2021 and 2025.² One hundred and seventy. The Morbi bridge in Gujarat

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killed 135 people – many of them children – after a renovation carried out by a contractor with no experience in bridge construction, certified by officials who were either incentivized or exhausted into compliance, opened before safety certification arrived because there was a festive season deadline to meet.³ An enquiry was constituted. The committee met. A report was filed. Legal proceedings commenced. They are proceeding still, at the stately pace of the Indian legal system, which moves slowly enough that the defendants have a reasonable actuarial chance of dying of old age before a verdict is reached. Meanwhile: More bridges. More tenders. Same contractors. Same incentives. Same outcome, pending.

7. The Indian Middle Class Has Paid to Secede from India While Continuing to Live in It

Private school because the government school has no teacher. Private hospital because the government hospital has no beds. Gated community because the public street has no pavement. Air purifier because the public air has no oxygen. Borewell because the public water supply has no water. Private security because the public police have no interest. The middle-class Indian is simultaneously funding two parallel systems – the public one through taxes and the private one through fees – and receiving adequate service from exactly one of them. They have, at considerable personal expense, contracted out of the Indian State while remaining legally obligated to fund

it. This is not a lifestyle choice. This is what happens when a State progressively abandons its responsibilities, and its most resourceful citizens find workarounds. The tragedy is not that the workarounds exist. The tragedy is that we have stopped noticing that they shouldn't need to.

8. We Celebrate Jugaad as Innovation When It Is Actually a Confession

Jugaad – the celebrated Indian art of the improvised solution, the workaround, the hack – is not a competitive advantage. It is a symptom. It is what happens when systems fail so consistently that the population develops elaborate coping mechanisms, and then, in a move of almost poetic self-delusion, rebrands those coping mechanisms as genius.

The jugaad motorbike-turned-tractor⁴ is not evidence of Indian ingenuity; it is evidence of an agricultural supply chain so broken that farmers cannot access proper equipment. The jugaad solution to the pothole is not clever. It is a confession that the road should not have had a pothole. Every jugaad is an admission that something has failed. We have built a national philosophy out of our failures and given it a name and put it in Technology, Entertainment, Design (TED) Talks. This, in itself, is a form of jugaad.

9. Our Politicians Inaugurate Infrastructure That Kills People and Call It Development

The ribbon-cutting is a sacred ritual of Indian public life. The highway that will develop potholes within one monsoon is inaugurated

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with flowers and speeches. The bridge that will fall within a decade is opened in time for the festive season. The smart city kiosk that doesn't work is photographed next to a smiling official. The development is announced. The development is included in the gross domestic product (GDP) statistics. The development is mentioned in the election campaign. And then the development deteriorates, collapses, floods or simply stops working, and this is attributed to weather, to population pressure, to the complexity of India's challenges, to anything except the people who built it badly, certified it corruptly and then moved on to the next inauguration. We have an entire political economy built around the cutting of ribbons for things that do not work. The ribbon is always excellent. It is the thing underneath the ribbon that is the problem.

10. We Know Exactly What Is Wrong and Exactly How to Fix It, and Have Chosen, With Magnificent Consistency, Not To

This is the one that should keep you awake at night. It is not that India's problems are mysterious. The solutions to air pollution are known – enforcement, clean fuel, agricultural alternatives to burning. The solutions to flooding are known – restore the wetlands, build the drains, stop the encroachment. The solutions to potholed roads are known – build them properly, maintain them regularly, hold the contractors accountable. The solutions to collapsing bridges are known – competent contractors, genuine certification, actual consequences for failure. The solutions to red tape are known – simplify, digitize, presume