

Experiences in a park in India

I learnt quite a lot on my recent trip to India this past week. There is a park two streets over from the house there. I am unclear on land ownership, but is maintained through an association of local residents, funded through the collection of a nominal fee.

Although this seems to be a common system of governance, akin to dreaded HOAs in the US, and perhaps even a microcosm of a democratic state government, I'd never had friction with such an entity thus far.

As the intensity of the summer sun eased in the evenings, my cousins and I sought recreation outside the confines of the house. My cousins had previously told me about ball games such as cricket, football, and even badminton being prohibited- a proposition I found ludicrous given the large patches of grass in between walking paths along with the severely lack of alternative locations for local youth to enjoy casual sport.

Starting off with a dander about the park, we eventually progressed to bringing a frisbee - specifically not a ball game. Initially being left to it, we had a near miss with a stray throw sailing over some senior citizens sat on a bench. They, perhaps fairly, told us off and claimed no games were allowed. Initially putting up some resistance, explaining the frisbee was quite light and was unlikely to cause any meaningful injury, I let it go once my cousin indicated a lot of the ladies were friends with our grandmother. Given my lack of familiarity with customs, there was a high chance I'd say something in a manner that would be perceived as out of line. To keep the peace, we apologised and moved to another area.

The next time, we had another near miss with some younger folk and they'd also advised us along the same lines, albeit stating they didn't mind us carrying on. Eventually, and mind you with no stimulus, another older man jaunted over and grabbed the frisbee at an opportune moment.

Accompanied by but in stark contrast to the younger, polite men earlier, he proudly announced himself as the president of the park association and stated no games whatsoever are allowed. As cousin #1 was gone to fetch cousin #2, I was the sole interlocuteur from our side in this discussion as the others were a bit young to weigh in with impact.

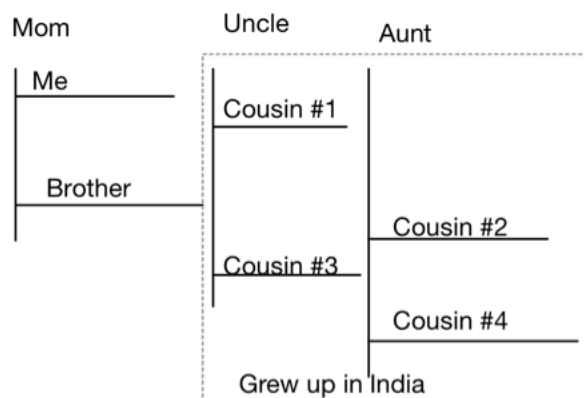


Figure 1: Vertical positioning indicates age. Higher up is older. Not to Scale.

If this had happened in Dubai, there would be no discussion as the rules would have been put in place by the municipality as part of a master plan - most importantly, we do not directly fund municipal works there, removing any claim towards the right of democratic consultation. In India, however, I was not going to take the statement as is, given my grandparents do in fact pay monthly fees towards the park.

Initially starting with the argument of a negligible chance of anything more than mild injury etc previously mentioned, the president asked me where I was from. Not wanting to name drop my grandparents (again, local norms would get messy), I stated abroad- to this, the president went on about how he would not even honour us with an explanation but that there are several stories, before descending into a monologue about how the rules are fair because he's stopped the local MLA's son, and even caused a rift with his brother by stopping his nephews.

Working hard to maintain a straight expression over the narrative of a family rift, I did give credit where it was due and commended his consistency. I then asked how these decisions were taken - how could I become a member and vote as I pleased. One of the younger men began to provide an explanation when mr president cut him off - a legitimate approach to undermine his authority had to quelled immediately.

We did cease our game that day with the sun setting, but I encouraged my resident cousins to continue to follow up on the route to membership. The current association members are primarily senior citizens. Who else has the time to take out to engage in the meetings etc I suppose. As a result, the children and youth suffer tremendously with the lack of representation.

Discussing the situation with my cousins later, we determined people get less flexible, and angrier as they get older. Cousin #3 attributed this to them sleeping less and then pointed out I've become much firmer with views than prior. This felt like a striking observation from him given just how young he was when he would've made his first benchmark to compare against. He is nonetheless probably right, and I see the same thing in my parents and grandparents. Perhaps the balance of democratic power should remain with the younger end of the spectrum by virtue of the typically greater adaptability and consideration for the opposition.

The conflict of interest in the park repeats itself constantly at the state and national scale, with local, state, and prime ministers typically much older than the mean age, and typically less educated than the median. A key difference in the democracies of India and the UK is the way constraints act as multipliers of friction. If space were more freely available in Indian cities, perhaps we'd never come close to the benches where senior citizens congregate.

The other side of both interactions in the park was one of frustration. My Hindi was clean enough for them to continue to engage without raising an eyebrow, but I was unable to maintain the level of eloquence I am accustomed to in discussions in English. Whilst my plain vocabulary was perhaps improved the ease of comprehension, I do believe the fact remains that being well spoken leads to being listened to more. And as this trip has shown, any age related leniency previously granted to me no longer remains.

To the virtues of a benevolent monarch,
Gautam