



Of distrust and harmony

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Owen in China

Hello, I'm Owen and this is my podcast for Friday 7th June, 2019. Ramadan has started and I have no idea how people manage Ramadan here in India. It's over 40 degrees every day. Even on lazy days I drink a minimum of three litres of water. It's easy to not eat during the day but I have no idea how they manage to go without [1] water for 15 hours.

Today, I'd like to share some of my thoughts on India.

I don't think I'm alone in regarding India as a very tolerant country. Considering how big and diverse the country is, it's almost surprising it works. Despite some tension between the majority Hindu population and the Muslim, Christian, Sikh, Buddhist and Jain minorities, it feels like there is a freedom to believe and follow whatever you want. With that strong freedom of religion comes a freedom of lifestyle, as long as it's framed [2] in a religious or spiritual way. Historically, India has also been very welcoming to anyone in search of spiritual enlightenment. It is, however, still a very conservative and patriarchal country. You won't meet any Hindus who are married to Muslims, for example. The current election has been a bit of a test for India's tolerance and diversity. As I'm recording this the results of the election haven't yet been announced but the governing party is on pace to win. The governing party is sometimes described as a Hindu nationalist party and is led by the current prime minister, Narendra Modi. Modi is from Gujarat where I'm currently residing [3]. Before becoming prime minister, he held the highest political office in Gujarat. He's a very divisive [4] figure. To understand why you have to go back to 2002. In 2002 there were serious riots between Hindus and Muslims in Gujarat. The riots happened because of a dispute [5] over a piece of land in northern India. There was a mosque there that was torn down [6] in order to build a Hindu temple. In 2002 a train carrying Hindu pilgrims returning from a religious ceremony there was set on fire and 59 people died. Hindus accused Muslims of starting the fire and what followed were numerous attacks on Muslims and Muslim-owned businesses. In the end more than 1000 people lost their lives. Modi, who was in charge of Gujarat at the time, was accused of doing too little to stop the riots. Some people even accused him of encouraging the attacks on Muslims. So when I ask people here about the election, the responses I get are predictable [7]. No Muslim I spoke to would ever vote for the Hindu nationalist party. Whereas a lot of Hindus here think Modi makes a great leader and they're proud of him because he's from their state. I must add here, though, that the town I'm in was not affected by the riots and there doesn't seem to be much tension here between Hindus and Muslims. The big test might come on 16th June. That is going to be a different kind of test for India. It's the Cricket World Cup and India will play against Pakistan on that day. It's the biggest and fiercest [8] rivalry in cricket. I have been told by a couple of Hindus that if Pakistan wins, Muslims in town will let off fireworks. I doubt that will actually happen but it does show that while there might not be much tension on the surface, there's plenty of distrust.

The day before leaving for India I was sorting out reading material for my trip. As usual I was doing everything last minute. Travelling is always a good time to catch up on some reading and I recalled the title of a non-fiction book I'd made a mental note [9] of at some point. I couldn't remember the name of the author or what the book was about but for some reason the title had stayed with me. I found a digital copy of the book and downloaded it onto my phone. I'm glad I did. The book has made me appreciate a side of India a lot more. The title of the book is "Seeing Like A State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed". It was



written by James C. Scott, a political scientist and anthropologist at Yale University. It's a long book and it covers a lot but I'll try and give you an idea of what it's about. The basic thesis [10] of the book is that states have simplified the world in order to allow them to govern more efficiently. Human nature is far too complex and nuanced for governments. In order to make governments work, societies have to be organised in certain ways. One example is early land reform [11], which made it easier and simpler to collect taxes. Another example would be the introduction of official languages. The author concedes [12] that in some cases these simplifications have been beneficial [13] but he argues that too often we have lost a lot culturally. The book is not specifically about India, but India does come up [14]. There's a chapter dedicated to Le Corbusier and his ideas on urban planning [15]. Le Corbusier's largest project was the design of a city built here in India. The author is very critical of Le Corbusier's theories and ideas on urban planning. This all gave me plenty of food for thought [16]. I grew up in a suburb and like most suburbs it was clearly divided into zones. There's the zone you live in, the zone you work in, the zone you shop in, the zone you socialise in, etc. In other words it's all very regulated but done in a way that, I suppose, seems very logical and convenient [17]. The author argues that this is not how we historically built towns and cities. It does, however, make it a lot easier to manage and govern from an authoritarian point of view. When I first arrived in the small town where I'm staying here in Gujarat, I thought it was all very chaotic. There didn't seem to be any order in this town. Of course it only seemed chaotic because it was alien [18] to me and I didn't understand it. There are no clear lines here between residential, commercial or social spaces. Everything is side by side and everything is connected. People live, work, eat, shop, socialise, all in one continuous [19] space. I'm finding that the longer I stay here, the better I understand it and the more I appreciate it. Daily life in this town feels very harmonious, it feels natural and communal. It doesn't feel like it's been imposed [20] or engineered. It's a town built by the people in an organic way.

That's all from me for this month. As always, thank you for listening and for your comments. You can listen to all our episodes by downloading our app or by visiting our website podclub.ch. Remember that you can also download our vocabulary trainer and you can find us on Instagram. I'll be back on 5th July with more stories from India. Until then, take care everyone. Goodbye!

Glossar: Owen in China

[1] **to go without sth.:** to not have sth., to live without sth. that you need or would like to have

[2] **to frame:** here: to express in a particular way

[3] **to reside:** to live

[4] **divisive:** likely to cause arguments between people

[5] **dispute:** a serious disagreement

[6] **to tear down:** to destroy or take apart

[7] **predictable:** as expected

[8] **fierce:** involving very strong feelings

[9] **to make a mental note of sth.:** to pay particular attention to sth. in order to remember it later

[10] **thesis:** here: an idea or theory that is used to explain sth

[11] **land reform:** the changing of laws and customs regarding land ownership

[12] **to concede:** to admit that sth. is true

[13] **beneficial:** helpful, producing good results

[14] **to come up:** here: to be mentioned and discussed

[15] **urban planning:** the planning of roads, buildings and spaces in cities

[16] **food for thought:** sth. that makes you think a lot about a subject

[17] **convenient:** easy to do or use

[18] **alien:** here: strange, different from what you're used to

[19] **continuous:** never stopping, uninterrupted

[20] **to impose:** to introduce and force people to accept