

SINGAPORE CALLING!

“You have impeccable argument if you said that Singapore, Hong Kong, and Tokyo are food capitals they have maximum amount of great stuffs to eat in the smallest areas ”

~Anthony Bourdain

My recent visit with family to Singapore and Malaysia, I mean Kuala Lumpur gave unique exposure to us in every walk of life. It is not that you can't know about foreign countries, their culture, places, environment and the people through internet but it is something different when you visit a place and communicate with the people there. A large number of people visit these places for different purposes everyday from India, but their perceptions are different, it is natural because two people can't be the same. For me it was a weeks' holiday with family on the strength of hard earned savings. Now, since the children have grown up their interests have also changed. My son is doing B.Tech in Computer Science so he was more interested towards education field for doing MBA there. My daughter being in Class Eleven medical group of course showed interest as a tourist to see different places.

It was no denying that though the Singapore is a new country which has undergone many changes during last 5-6 decades but impressions of Chinese, British and Malaysian rule are still visible. The country is as small as an island that area wise we can compare it with Delhi. There is no big industrial or agricultural base for this small country but still the economic condition is superb. Modernisation in every field whether it is for the cleanliness, high rise buildings, greenery, Metro Rail, Road transport, shopping malls, picnic spots or other public utility services and what not.

As an Indian it was but natural for me to compare each and everything with India. I do not know why everything there was looking artificial. Things were too costly especially eatables. For a vegetarian it was a difficult task. Well for a person interested in Thai food or in sea food it is heavens. You will find the touch of fish everywhere. When my wife insisted on a vegetarian dish it was non-veg chowmein covered with some pieces of cabbage. Water was not scarce but it charged 2\$ a bottle of one litre so it is better to have cold drink for 1 \$.

Since Singapore is basically surviving on tourism therefore, the picnic spots were really worth seeing. Especially the management of every activity was superb. When you name Sentosa Island, Underwater World and Pink Dolphins, Night Safari and the Malls of Suntech City, Harbour front and viva, you will find nothing new as compared to our malls in Gurgaon and Noida. Night Safari is having the animals which are quite common rather Hindi thing is there when you name the animal “*Barasingha*”. Again and again this question was coming to my mind why we can't

have 10 places like Singapore in India especially when we do have much better flora, fauna and natural beauty. The places of Singapore cannot match with our Kovalam Beach, Changu lake at Nathula, Kalimpong, Port Blair, Garhwal and Kumaun regions and of course Kashmir valley and Leh. The whole of North-East India, Meghalaya, Arunachal are beyond comparison with regard to their natural beauty. Then why we are so much amazed with Singapore and Malaysia. This question was haunting my mind. Our metro rail in Delhi is much better than Singapore Metro (may be because it is new) the only difference is that they do not have any driver. The safety measures are far better than us.

The most important aspect of Singapore was the culture of honesty prevailing in all spheres of life. When I analysed various activities I observed that really this is the basic component which has made the difference between India and Singapore. You can't afford to be dishonest. Just see a MRT card for 10\$ which can be used for Metro and buses too. You need to be quite religious while using it. While entering the bus or train you swap it and while coming out you need to again swap it to see that money is debited. And if you try to be tricky by escaping the swapping while coming out from the bus they have the system that the fare upto the last destination of MRT will be deducted automatically from your card. You cannot afford to throw Cigarette or smoke Cigarette freely anywhere you like as a matter of fact you do not feel like throwing also on public places because the city is so clean and dry.

Well, there is penalty also which stops you in doing so and you do not find people chewing tobacco, pan, littering here and there. The roads are so clean that it is difficult to find dust particles. They must be cleaning roads during night hours. On the construction sites it is ensured that the vehicle is on the road only after proper cleaning. The dead leaves falling from the trees are removed regularly. The taxi drivers are too honest. They cannot afford to cheat you, it is all computerized. Not only is the fare, the places travelled by taxi are displayed with proper announcements. You get a receipt for the money paid. Even 5 cents are returned by the driver.

We Indians are having horrifying experience in our Metros especially due to bad law and order situation. A girl cannot afford to walk alone on the roads when it is dark in Delhi, Gurgaon, Noida because you never know when a van with some *goondas* may come and grab her to be raped and later thrown on the road side. This problem of law and order is so grave in our country that solution appears to be quite difficult because you cannot provide police for everybody. Moreover, when police personnel themselves involve in the crime than who is going to save the public. Now, see in Singapore we never observed police control or traffic personnel. But still there was no problem. Why it was so? While interacting with the people we came to know that they have very harsh punishment for certain crimes say 5-7 *koras*, i.e. strokes for eve teasing. Death penalty for drug trafficking. 100 to 1000 \$ fine for littering, throwing cigarette butts or making the places dirty. When I say stroke it is *kora* what we learnt in stories of Mughal period. It is still there.

Let me tell you a very interesting incident narrated to me by a person there. A foreigner was caught at Changi Airport with large quantity of unknown medicine which appeared to be some sort of drug. He was a transit passenger and in Singapore you don't have the provision for transit visa like Britain. This man being caught was awarded punishment of 3 koras but he could not sustain the first one and was badly injured with bleeding. He pleaded that he may be released due to the fact that he cannot stay in Singapore without visa but the authorities granted him a transit visa and treated him well at their own cost so as to sustain second kora which followed by treatment of one more week to have the final third kora meaning thereby the man remained there for 3 weeks at the cost of Government so as to have the full punishment. Look at the judicial system it is so quick and fast that there is no choice of any delay or appeals. You have hidden cameras at most of the places which generate evidence and the panel of judges are there to make their judgement on the Laptop for immediate implementation. You have no other way except to admit the crime that you are guilty to and have punishment. You cannot speak against the government publically.

The press is controlled. You get a bulky newspaper free of cost at your door step everyday. Well democracy is there for name sake. Nobody is grumbling. People are satisfied because they do not have time for gossip. It is work, work and work. The doors of your house are open. You remove your shoes, leave umbrella outside the house unattended. There is no incidence of theft because again the punishment may go up to 3 koras. I need not tell you as to what I mean by kora. Just that about Arabian koras. Even the floating population of the city mainly due to tourist are so much afraid of these laws that they cannot think of committing any crime and it is all spread with word of mouth except the posters which says that drug trafficking attracts death penalty. You do not find any stray dogs or cattles on the roads. You have guava, mango and apple, nicely cut into pieces, vegetables in plastic sealed boxes but let me be very frank that the Indian taste was not there because we are in the habit of eating things in natural way. Nobody asked me for the tips there. There are no beggars, the prices of most of the things are fixed except in China Town, Little India where you can bargain. Cigarettes are damn costlier so as the beer and liquor.

Since our visit was personal tour, i.e., why we were quite conscious about the money spent since we wanted to be within our budget. Though we never compromised for our comforts and site seeing etc. but for purchasing we went to Mustafa and Niranjana at Race Course road. Mustafa is multi storeyed large market where you can find each and everything you want. There is nobody to check you what things you are keeping in your basket but a very good alarm system is there. A person can be caught very easily if he is taking out anything without making payment. There is a system of inventory and de-inventory. All the things are scanned with bar code. Any item which has not been deleted from the inventory on the basis of bar code reading is considered as a stolen article and the computerized system detects it by making an alarm. The punishment for this theft is also very quick and harsh again koras or heavy fine. Who will dare to do ? Tell me. They have removed

all possibilities of crime by making stringent punishment that too with very quick process of law

Now a poet, writer, professor and a bureaucrat in me was feeling restless unless I interact with the literary circle and students in the educational institute of Singapore. That made me visit to National University of Singapore and a few places which were connected with the art and literature. It was really a proud moment for me when I could find my book "Living a stressful life with joy" in the bookshops at Singapore and Malaysia too. It was quite astonishing that a writer gets so much respect in Singapore. It gave me with pleasant surprise and I could tell about my other books. The interaction with the students in NUS made me to realize that they are much focused than Indian Management students. I was happy to see the respect being given to Indian management experts it was really a matter of great privilege and proud when head of management studies appreciated my profile and showed willingness to consider me as a guest faculty. Let me see if I get the opportunity to share my experience with NUS.

There was a very interesting case of honesty witnessed by me at NUS library which is all computerized and a student goes to a machine to pay the fine for late deposit of books by using his credit card. After that he goes to another counter with lot of books to be returned. The books are again put into the box and the receipt comes out instantly. Acknowledging the fine received. The student again goes for browsing the books on computer. It was all systematic even the reading rooms, waiting hall, almirahs etc. The bookshop on the ground floor also gave unique impression of books display. Outside the central library lot of benches were there where students were busy interacting and doing their projects. You get nice tea, coffee, cold drinks and wafers just by putting the coins into the machine and the things come out with the balance change. For a trial when my children and wife took cold drinks and wafers, it was my turn to have hot tea for 40 cents. 1\$ coin in the machine gave me a nice hot tea and the balance 60 cents also came out. The things were quite cheap in NUS may be because students are there and they might have subsidized things. In the class-rooms, reading rooms, auditorium, the university campus was really very big. It reminded me of IIT Bombay and Delhi. But there was a difference in the activities of IITs and NUSs. The approach is different, the work culture is different and the meaning of education is also different. The students too have different attitude and aptitude for their mission. It was a mixture of students from different countries. Some Indians were also there. The faculty was mainly from USA, UK and China barring a few Indians. The salary structure is very high for a full-time management faculty. Unconfirmed sources revealed that it is to the tune of 25 to 35 thousand \$ per month.

You must be interested in knowing about the property prices there. Seeing the property market in India especially at Bombay and Delhi I can comfortably say that if you are planning to have a house in the posh locality of Bombay and Delhi you can also have a house in Singapore at the same cost. Rent wise also it is not that costly. Well you need to check as to whether you can own property there because now a days, they are quite strict in giving you citizenship. Though the visa

process is quite liberal and you can easily get a multiple entry visa of two years on a nominal fee of Rs. 500/-.

This article cannot be concluded unless I talk about Changi Airport which is considered to be world's best Airport, in fact it is. Remotely I cannot compare with Indian Airports. The things are so systematic that you do not require an enquiry counter there. There is no rush. All activities are running quite smoothly. There is no multi-layer checking you carry your boarding passes and there are so many bays and aero bridges. The airport looks like a big mall. You can purchase anything. You need not walk since escalators are there. A beautiful sky train connecting terminals is there. While leaving Singapore do not forget to take refund for your used MRT cards. It goes for refund of 3\$ per card. For the goods purchased from Mustafa you get refund of 5% GST though from Niranjana it is not there. But you do not mind it because things are quite cheap. A big bargain on computers for 800\$ you get Dell laptop and for a little amount of 135\$ a flat screen 21 inches TV is available. During my visit the cost of Singapore \$s was Rs. 27.50. It is there in Singapore but at Delhi Airport you need to shell out Rs. 30/- for purchasing a single Singapore \$.

Well I do not feel like talking more about Malaysia since we were there hardly for two days in a package tour. That too was only at Kuala Lumpur. The journey was by bus from Singapore to Malaysia and back. Beautiful roads, sight seeing, high rise buildings and excellent coach with massage facility for the whole body on every seat and small TV too with different channels was available. The food again was sea food which a vegetarian cannot eat. Thanks to some *laddoos* and *mathari* carried by my wife which later on made a problem for Singapore customs to identify these items since my bag was made to open and it was difficult for them to recognize our food stuff. You cannot carry cigarettes from Malaysia to Singapore. Since I could not afford to smoke even a single cigarette in Singapore I purchased a packet of Dun Hill cigarettes for 6\$ in Malaysia. The bus driver gave me very clear instructions to open the packet and smoke at least 2-3 cigarettes otherwise there was a danger of having fine or a kora at Singapore customs. They do not encourage you to bring cigarettes and liquor in Singapore.

In Malaysia, Times Square and Twin Towers were unique things. Unfortunately we could not go to the highest floors of twin tower and our visit was confined to 6th floor only where malls are there. You can easily have good bargaining in Malaysia even for taxis. It was like India when we went to little India market. The quality of things was quite poor. The taxi drivers were mostly Pakistanis or Indians. The law and order situation is worst because in our hotel itself they prominently displayed warning not to venture after 10 p.m. because there is danger of eve teasing, chain snatching and pick pocketing. So we were really having a tight schedule to visit the places there. The twin tower memento was purchased for 25 ringette equivalent to 12 Rs per ringette and changing markets it came down to 10 ringettes per piece. So much bargaining is there. The food is cheap and you get Indian food also. We were quite happy to see the travel agents systematic arrangements and tie up in Malaysia with the hotel. The hotels are beautiful, well

organized. They have been built in such a manner that from every room you can view twin-towers.

It was raining in Malaysia we could feel but in Singapore we never felt it because the drainage system was superb. The water scarcity is not there in Malaysia rather they export water to Singapore. There is recycling of every drop of water even from the waste in Singapore. We were surprised that how the drainage system works in Singapore because in spite of having 1-hour heavy rainfall soon after the roads became dry. The Malaysia is far behind Singapore in every way. Though once upon a time Singapore was a part of Malaysia.

In Malaysia I was amazed to see the Muslim ladies in every walk of life even in hotels and highly sophisticated IT industry. They were wearing western outfit in the hotels and no where you can say that the Muslim women are not modern there. It looks that in our country only the Muslim women education is poor, otherwise seeing the condition in Malaysia, I can say that they are quite advanced, educated and intelligent a lot who can beat the women of any other religion. This impression has come to me only after talking to them and seeing their high knowledge level.

I really wonder why we cannot make a Dubai, Singapore or Hong Kong in India. Look at the pictures of Dubai in 1990 and today. Same is the case of 60s today for Hong Kong and Singapore. Something or the other is going on in Singapore whether it is flyover or building construction or opening of a new mall. The city is moving and we are there as tourist to see that it moves on. They depend on us but still they are competent to teach us. We are not being able to follow them why a big question? I am still trying to find the answers. Good bye till I make my next visit to Dubai and Hong Kong.
