Twitter Thread by Gaurav Sabnis ■■■■



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Most elite Indians (primarily savarna white collar urban english medium educated folks like me) land on Western shores convinced that we are just as advanced and developed as these countries as a people. It's just "corruption" in India holding us back. Then reality hits. /1

We see that the West works better on a daily level, but not because of some mythical genetic or societal immunity to this mythical "corruption" villain. Cos there is corruption in Western politics too. They seem to have institutions and systems built over ages to minimize it.

But most Indians who reach these shores are engineer/mba/doctor types. Trained in secondary vocational type disciplines. So our default approach is to find a quick engineering type solution. We have almost zero exposure to sociology, psychology, economics, anthropology, etc.

I remember being like that. Engineer-MBA who thought that because my vocabulary and exposition skills were above average and my quant skills were above average, I deserve a seat at the table on any discussion. Be it climate change, public health, efficacy of vaccines, etc.

For anything, I thought I knew the best. Why was this Obama fellow not trying my absolutely brilliant healthcare reform plan that I have posted on a blog with nice tables and graphs and references to IIT and IIM slang? Does he not know I'm from an IIM? <1% acceptance rate!

My PhD at Penn State slowly but surely changed that. As I learned more, I realized how little I knew. And while I'm still a very emphatic egotistic opinion sharer by default, I try to restrain my tongue and right index fingers on topics I don't know enough about.

A big part of it was humanities education. Marketing is a secondary discipline built on economics, psychology, sociology, and statistics. To get a PhD in it, I had to do deep dives into actual research in those fields. Not just well written blogs and longform articles.

Just a year into that PhD, I immediately found myself questioning a lot of things I'd held as axiomatically true. For example, "raising minimum wage is as pointless as changing the gravitational constant."
Or "casteism is bad but reservations do more harm than good".

Etc.

And of course, the big one, that I had been very systematically indoctrinated into, looking back.

"Yes, climate is changing. But climate always changes. Human impact debatable. Even if it is a factor, nothing can be done given economic realities. Nothing. But market can fix it."

In india, from birth till I flew out at age 26, I had interacted people mostly like myself. In India, we savarna white collar urban folks are champion gatekeepers. Even the slightest dissent on "reservations suck" has a high social cost when most of your friends are Brahmin.

So my two years of coursework opened my mind. Made my realize that not all "socialism" is USSR or even Indira Gandhi socialism. That "why should I be punished for my ancestors' bigotry?" is not the self-evidently convincing argument I thought it was.

Those years of coursework, delivered by professors without the "Shut Up and Listen and women, don't wear tight clothes!" college culture I was used to in India helped a lot. Professors who didn't treat student questions like personal challenges to authority. Also students who...

.. didn't ask questions or do "CP" just for grades or no needle the professor or to win debates. In those PhD classes (3 hours at a stretch), I realized how little I knew. This was not India where exposition predicated on Daedalian vocabulary was inexorably efficacious■.

You needed to build actual arguments. Take into account contrary evidence. "Let's agree to disagree" or "We just have different first principles" don't cut it when a brilliant classmate who happens to be black asks you why you thought the civil rights act was govt overreach.

Then I joined Twitter in 2010 and that exposed me to even more people different than me, especially Indians from historically oppressed groups. Talking politics. At length. That helped more than anything on the ground in India, where those voices get shut out or even arrested.

That's the thread for now. I didn't have some larger conclusion here. Just thinking out loud after a conversation with a childhood friend about how much the US changed us both.

I was not like a full scale sanghi before coming to the US. I was writing stuff like this in 2005. But yeah, I was doggedly wrong on many things. Especially economics. I too woulda been arrogant enough to call Elizabeth Warren "economically ignorant". ■

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But the world that I was raised in, "get rid of all government except defense, foreign policy, courts" sounded like a more elegant engineering solution than "let's try to build better systems even if they remain flawed in our lifetimes and remember, these are humans, not toys."