

My impressions of Lucknow

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I was born and raised in Lucknow. I did my schooling in St. Francis High School and received my Indian school leaving certificate in 1966. In 1967 I got into IIT Kanpur for my B.Tech and M.Tech and left for US in 1974 for higher studies. After my Ph.D. and a stint of teaching in U.S., I came back to India in late 1981 to run our own NGO in rural Maharashtra. Since then I have been managing it.

My father who was a freedom fighter and was briefly in Shri. H. N. Bahuguna's cabinet in U.P. used to live in a flat in Lal Bagh opposite Basant cinema. This spacious flat was where I spent most of my childhood in early 1960s. After my father's death in 2006 we left the flat and wound up our Lucknow existence.

Recently I came back to visit Lucknow after almost 5 years and the changes I saw were both good and bad.

Lucknow used to be a city of parks. Within a km or so of our flat in Lal Bagh there were half a dozen beautiful parks – Hazrat Mahal Park, Lal Bagh Park, Moti Mahal, Botanical Gardens, Zoo, Golf course etc. I still remember after school I would come home, have my lunch and then go to one of these parks with my books to study. The quiet and pleasant environment of the parks was very peaceful for studies. One cannot think of doing anything like that now. Most of these parks have been converted into buildings and the noise level of traffic is too much for any quiet activity.

From our house in Lal Bagh to St. Francis School (in those days it was called High School; now it is a College) it took us only 10 minutes by a walk. There was hardly any traffic and both I (age 11) and my brother (age 7) would go by ourselves after crossing two major roads of Hazratganj and Lal Bagh. Nowadays both these roads are extremely crowded and so choke-full with traffic that even elders find them hard to cross.

There were few good restaurants during my schooling days. The pride of the place was taken by the Kquality restaurant in Mayfair building. Even when I stayed in U.S. I hardly came

across any restaurant which matched the grandeur or the quality of cuisine of this restaurant. Unfortunately this restaurant is now gone together with the Mayfair cinema and British Council Library which were housed in the same building.



Nowadays there are scores of good eating places in Lucknow though only a few are in Hazaratganj. Any city which starts to grow is characterized by the increase in number of eating places and the traffic on its roads. Lucknow is thus fast catching up with cities like Pune, Hyderabad etc. The evening and morning traffic with roads choked with autorickshaws, cars and two wheelers is becoming a nightmare.

During my school and IIT days (during vacation) I would take long morning walks from our house in Lal Bagh going past the Zoo, over the golf course past La Martiniere College and ending in Dilkusha Gardens. The route was extremely pleasant with hardly any traffic and with greenery and huge trees all along it was a very pleasant walk.



This time when I tried going on that route I simply got lost. The 4-lane highway going to Gomati Nagar near the Zoo and the Golf course has completely changed the Lucknow geography. The huge stone-work of Ambedkar Park and its 125 elephants is jarring to the eyes and to the senses and the greenery is completely gone. Lucknow even in the middle of October was hot and humid and these

stone and concrete structures added to the heat.

La Martiniere College is now gated and the open-space look is gone. It has a beautiful and majestic building but its up-keep leaves much to be desired. By comparison St. Francis School building is freshly painted and the whole school campus looks neat and clean.



Hazratganj which was the heart of Lucknow during my school days has been spruced up and looks grand with freshly coloured buildings with their black signboards, lamp posts, wide clean footpaths lined with iron grills and general overall cleanliness. Nevertheless the old Kotwali (where my father was interned for 1 month during the 1942 freedom struggle) is gone. In its place is the multi-level parking space – a sign of times.

Other buildings like Charbagh Railway Station, Central secretariat (Vidhan sabha) building, GPO building etc. have also been painted and spruced up. However rest of the Lucknow is as dirty, crowded and unplanned as ever. Ambedkar Park in Gomati Nagar is lighted up like Paris at night and just after Lucknow City the outlying villages are in complete darkness.

The old Coffee House near the GPO crossing has been replaced by a new restaurant which



resembles Cafe Coffee Day! This is the place where my father and so many of his political associates spent their time discussing the politics of the day. Now only a few of the old people come and it is crowded with young people who obviously provide good income to the Coffee House!

A great city is characterized by the overall ambience, traffic sense and greenery. Most of these things are still missing in Lucknow. With increased population and hence increased traffic it has started resembling the other choked cities of India.

I still long for my old Lucknow with tremendous greenery and huge open spaces.

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