I am finally in Mumbai, India. And it’s really the most extreme city I have seen.

I am here to work with a non-governmental organisation. And having just left comfortable Singapore, I couldn’t help but think about how different the two cities are.

Especially since I have just read a newspaper report discussing how India and China are challenging Singapore’s edge in innovation.

Observing how the Indians work and about the day-to-day living, I have grasped a thing or two about what makes the people tick.

In Singapore, things frequently work. In India, particularly in Mumbai and Kolkata, it’s unspoken knowledge that nothing works as planned.

Chaos is not something that happens elsewhere – it’s a part of daily life.

This has forced Indians to be resilient in whatever they do.

If there is a traffic jam on the normal route to work, there will be five other routes to try.

If there is a power outage, computers still keep humming on backup power.

If rains have flooded the streets, the milkman will still arrive, albeit a little late.

Everyone here has a backup plan for everything. I guess that makes it easy to bounce back when things fail.

In Singapore, we generally have a couple of ways to achieve something, and we plan to perfection.

When things go wrong along the way, we complain. Or panic. Failure, or a small deviation from what we are used to, is seldom tolerated.

Yes, we do things very well, but on the other hand, we are generally in the lurch when unexpected problems arise.

Planning is useful as a discipline to force people to think carefully about what they can do, given their resources.

But given that change is inevitable, should we learn to throw the plan away once we start and keep our eyes on reality instead?

Also, in India, there is no assumption that the government is a facilitator.

And trust is not presumed.

Don’t rely on public services. The bus doesn’t arrive on time.

Even the supermarket cashier seldom returns accurate change.

The end result? People have to think on their feet and look out for themselves.

In contrast, are Singaporeans dulled by order and convenience, and lulled into inaction by the safety nets around us?

When was the last time you did some maths without using the calculator?

Or took the stairs when there was a huge crowd waiting for one slow lift?

Are we less alert to dangers, theft and petty crimes when we are overseas because we hardly have to be on our guard for such things in Singapore?

COMPLACENT

Sometimes, we need to force ourselves to step out of our comfort zones, so we can feel sharp and rigorous again.

But the most outstanding quality I have discovered about the people I have met in the past week is this: They are probably more curious than cats.

I took a five-hour bus ride from Delhi to Jaipur. Beside me sat a man in his 40s. He started a conversation with me and found out, among other things, what I had been doing on campus. He was intrigued by the university’s theory of teaching and chatted with me for hours.

By the end of the journey, he had determined what he wanted his son to study in university.

In Singapore, if you spoke to someone beside you on the train, you would receive some weird looks. You probably would not try again.

But what is there to lose? We should never discount the knowledge another person might have, that could help us in unexpected ways.

Curiosity, enthusiasm and self-reliance skills are seldom harmful. So why shy away from them? They may be, what’s needed to make us tick faster than the rest of the region.

The writer is a fresh graduate from the School of Information Systems at Singapore Management University.