NEW ESSAY

Why I Write About Systems, Society and Stories

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Why this publication ranges across energy, mobility, public systems, human behaviour and experiences from life.

I have always been curious about why things work the way they do.

Over the years, I have increasingly started looking at most issues through two lenses: **the system and the people who operate within it.**

This thinking perhaps became much stronger during my years of working on safety. One lesson stayed with me. We can design good equipment, establish procedures, provide safeguards and put rules in place. Yet, at the end, a human being can follow the system, bypass it or even override it.

Safety thinking itself has evolved considerably. Initially, the emphasis was on making technology safer. Then came greater recognition of human factors. Later, organisational culture, leadership and working practices became equally important. Eventually, safety came to be understood as an interaction between technology, people and organisations. That way of thinking stayed with me. A technically good system can still produce a poor outcome if we do not understand how people will actually behave within it.

And when people repeatedly behave in a particular way, perhaps we should also ask whether the system has been designed with that behaviour in mind.

I find this equally relevant outside safety. Take electric vehicle charging. For an engineer, the discussion can quickly become one about power, charger capacity, AC or DC, electricity networks and technical standards. All these are important. But the person considering an electric vehicle is asking much simpler questions. Will I be able to charge when I need to? Will the charger work? How long will I have to wait? What happens if I travel outside my usual route? These questions are important from consumer's experience point of view. A city can have thousands of charging points and still not give an EV user confidence if the chargers are badly located, unreliable or unavailable when required. **This is where technology starts meeting human behaviour.**

I encountered another example when we were debating whether EV charging should be considered simply as resale of electricity. Technically, electricity is certainly being supplied to the vehicle. But is electricity alone what the consumer is paying for? At a charging station, the consumer also gets access to charging equipment, high power, parking space, information, customer support and a safe charging process. I therefore argued that EV charging should be treated as a service rather than merely as sale of electricity. It was a regulatory question. But underneath it was again the interaction between the system and the person using it.

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I can trace this way of thinking even further back.

While studying the recurring flood problem of the Kosi river, I became interested in why repeated attempts to control the river had not completely solved the problem.

Kosi carries enormous quantities of sediment and has historically shifted its course over a very large area. Dams, barrages and embankments have their role. But the river is itself a dynamic system. Unless we understand how it behaves, constructing another structure cannot by itself provide the complete answer.

> *My old paper on Kosi therefore argued for understanding the behaviour of the river and adopting a multipronged approach rather than looking at one structural solution alone.*

Years later, I found myself asking similar questions in completely different settings. Recently, for example, I was looking at student accommodation in Delhi. The immediate discussion was about building more university hostels and regulating private PG accommodation better. Both are necessary. But when I looked at the numbers, I started wondering whether we were framing the problem correctly. Delhi University currently has only a small number of hostel beds compared with its overall student population. Even after the substantial expansion now planned, university hostels will still accommodate only a fraction of students who may need housing. So I found myself asking another basic question: should a university necessarily become a large housing developer and landlord? That took me to the student-housing model in Finland, where specialised organisations provide accommodation while universities remain connected to students without themselves having to build and manage every residence. Delhi obviously cannot copy Finland. Our land market, incomes, institutions and scale are very different. But another system can sometimes help us ask a better question about our own.

I remember approaching Helsinki on a winter evening. From the aircraft I could see frozen lakes, snow-covered forests and almost everything below covered in white. Yet normal life continued. My immediate thought was: why do comparatively smaller weather events sometimes bring our own cities to a halt? Later during the same trip, I noticed roads functioning normally despite heavy snow and industrial facilities dealing with large quantities of waste while remaining remarkably clean. At the same time, of course, I was simply enjoying the experience—Lapland, snow-covered forests, sauna, reindeer, huskies and skiing. That combination of experience and curiosity probably explains why I do not want to write only about energy or electric mobility.

Energy and mobility will naturally remain important because I have spent a considerable part of my professional life working in these areas. But many questions that interest me today lie outside them.

> *Why do we knowingly violate a rule which exists for our own safety?*
> *Why do we tolerate a badly functioning public system for years?*
> *Why does a policy which appears perfectly logical on paper produce a very different outcome when implemented?*

> *Why does something work reasonably well in one place and fail in another?*
> *Why do people respond differently from what policymakers, engineers or managers expected?*

I do not intend to comment on every issue in the news. Nor do I claim expertise on every subject that interests me.

What I would rather do is take an issue that catches my attention, understand it a little better, look at the facts, question the conventional explanation and then form a view.

Sometimes I may be right. Sometimes I may discover later that I was wrong.

In fact, I intend to revisit some of the articles I wrote several years ago on electric mobility and ask exactly that: **What did I get right? What did I get wrong? And why?**

I see nothing uncomfortable in changing one's view when facts change. That is part of understanding a problem better.

So the subjects on this platform will vary. There will be systems—energy, mobility, infrastructure, institutions and public policy. There will be society—our behaviour, incentives, choices and sometimes our contradictions. And there will be stories—from travel, work and life—because occasionally an experience makes us notice something that a report or spreadsheet does not.

> *The subjects may change. The two questions behind them probably will not:*
> ***Why do we behave like this? How can we do better?***