

Getting in (and Out of) Line

By [ANAND GIRIDHARADAS](#)

MUMBAI, India — In India, waiting in line is not for the soft-elbowed.

When a line becomes necessary — say, while boarding a plane — some dutiful citizens will rise and form its initial trunk. Then, when the trunk appears too long to some, it sprouts branches. People create their own lines by standing next to, say, the fourth person in the trunk and hoping that others line up behind them. This process continues until you have a human evergreen tree, a single-file trunk of tender fools with impatient foliage on both sides.

There is a feline quality to standing in Indian lines. Certain parts of the man behind you — you don't know which — brush against you in a kind of public square spooning, the better to repel cutters. (Women do less touching.) Still, this is no deterrent to cutters. They hover near the line's middle, holding papers, looking lost in a practiced way, then slip in somewhere close to the front. When confronted, their refrain is predictable: "Oh, I didn't see the line."

But in a churning India, the line has new resilience. Businesses are becoming vigilant about enforcing queues, and a growing middle class, more well-off and less survivalist, is often less eager to cut. In this way, India's experience seems to feed into a tradition of seeing line etiquette as a marker of modernity, of graduating from chaos to order, whims to rules, brutality to gentility, scarcity to abundance.

The reality may be more complicated, though, for in India and elsewhere, the reigning idea of modernity involves not just an evolution into queuing but also an evolution out. As scums succumb to queues, queues are succumbing to the free market.

The story of the scum, the queue and the market begins, in most versions, in a Hobbesian state of nature in which the scum controlled all. People got what they got based on their ability to push and pull, maim and slaughter.

It required new ideas — of fairness, equality and the like — to replace scums with lines. Internet discussion boards are full of stories about societies that were once terrifying free-for-alls — that is, until progress, meaning lines, came. The idea has even been printed in the pages of the Encyclopaedia Britannica, in a description of queuing in Hong Kong:

"When McDonald's opened in 1975, customers clumped around the cash registers, shouting orders and waving money over the heads of people in front of them. McDonald's responded by introducing queue monitors — young women who channeled customers into orderly lines. Queuing subsequently became a hallmark of Hong Kong's cosmopolitan, middle-class culture. Older residents credit McDonald's for introducing the queue, a critical element in this social transition."

James L. Watson, the Harvard scholar whose research led to the entry, has noted that McDonald's "did not, in fact, introduce the queue to Hong Kong." But such is the association between globalization and lines in the Hong Kong imagination that the belief stuck, he has written. This line-as-civilization notion is popular among Britons, who sometimes boast that they invented lines. This year, [their government announced plans to make aspirants for citizenship](#) answer questions about "the revered British practice of forming an orderly line for everything from buses to sandwiches," as The Daily Telegraph put it. But the line not only speaks of civilization. It also stands for dysfunction: dole lines in recessions and depressions; lines in the Soviet Union to buy basics like meat and toilet paper; lines to get driver's licenses worldwide; lines to register complaints; lines in which slum-dwelling women wait to defecate behind closed doors.

Faced with such lines, humans tend to imagine progress as an escape from linear waiting. As a FedEx advertisement put it many years ago, "Waiting is frustrating, demoralizing, agonizing, aggravating, annoying, time consuming and incredibly expensive." Contained in that last word is a hint of FedEx's — and the modern world's — solution: the free market. Why wait? Just pay.

Today, Russian malls rise on the ground where Soviet lines once wound; the more affluent villagers in developing countries buy key-locked portable toilets to avoid the morning queue; governments issue "rush" visas so that business travelers can jump the line for a few hundred extra dollars. The line-jumping once reserved for the world's commissars is now a middle-class commodity.

You see it here in India. Even as it moves toward more orderly lines in some spheres, the line is under attack in others, challenged by the market. The famous Hindu temple in Tirupati, in southern India, now has a regular idol-viewing tour and a V.I.P. one, for those who pay. Even as new nightclubs bring rope-line culture to India, many also sell premium memberships that let you skip the line and walk in. As with lines over scums, markets have much to offer over lines. They are more efficient. They work well for those fortunate enough to have more disposable money than free time. They mop up much of the daily agony of waiting.

But the market also changes a culture. A line conceives of people as citizens, presumed equal, each with an identical 24 hours a day to spread among the lines around them. A market conceives of people as consumers, presumed unequal, with those who can pay in front of the others. It allocates efficiently, but it eliminates a feature of line culture: the idea that, in line at least, we are no better than anybody else.

In a way, the market's spread is a return to another kind of scum, one in which financial, and not physical, might means right. Perhaps one day lines will be remembered as antique, a quaint system in which things were granted simply for having shown up early, an interlude of relative equality between the scums that reigned before and after.