

Imagining India: The Idea of a Renewed Nation; Nandan Nilekani (Penguin Press)

A Review by Pradeep Anand, April 2009

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(Nandan Nilekani was the Chief Guest at the Book Launch of my book [An Indian in Cowboy Country](#) on December 8, 2010, at the Crossword bookstore, Kemp's Corner, Mumbai, India.)

I have been a student of India since my childhood. I was born a few years after India gained its independence from the British and during my entire life I have been fascinated by the country that was a civilization before it became a nation. Its history, geography, culture, religions, economy, mythology, science, thought and other intrinsic societal facets were rich but masked by the grime of its three-hundred year colonial past and restricted by the local context of my hometown, Bombay.

My quest to understand India and Indians got a great fillip when I migrated to the United States from where I could see and study the country of my birth objectively and in its entirety. Consequently, over the last thirty years, I have landed in that sweet, balanced spot of being close enough to India to understand nuances and far enough to be objective.

Businesses and academia are fascinated by India, especially after its jump into Americans' imagination as a reliable outsourcing country and a partner. I am often called to speak about understanding India and Indians at universities, at businesses, and at conferences. I have a deck of slides that I can whiz through with practiced ease but I am under constant pressure to stay current with this dynamic nation.

"Imagining India: The Idea of a Renewed Nation" by Nandan Nilekani (Penguin Press, \$29.95) is a tremendous asset to any student of India. The co-chairman of Infosys (NYSE:INFY), one of the more significant technology outsourcing companies, has detailed this complex nation's journey to its current situation, identifies some major issues that can derail its energetic growth momentum, and provides credible policy solutions to sustain and grow the world's largest democracy.

This ambitious, five-hundred-page book is engrossing. To a hungry mind (like mine), it can read like a thriller, where social, historical, economic, class, political, technical, ethical, religious, health, demographic, linguistic, and ethnic strands weave in and out, unfolding an intricate and taut plot.

To a casual, superficial observer, India's divided society can make the country look like shattered glass that is teetering, on the verge of breaking into its parts. Nilekani researches and dives deep into these very cracks and extracts evidence of the cohesive forces that bind its people together, to create a global economic powerhouse.

To Nilekani, India is an idea, similar to the United States, built on the far-sighted democratic fervor of its founders. The book has four parts:

1. Ideas That Have Arrived
2. Ideas in Progress
3. Ideas in Battle
4. Ideas to Anticipate

These sections describe India's accidental, muddled trek from a poor, starkly socialist but democratic country to its current state as a player in the global economy. The

future has great promise because of the young workforce that it possesses. This “demographic dividend” can unleash unprecedented economic growth in the country, provided the government and the myriad political parties embrace reform that promotes sustainable, economic growth. However, the country has to reach these goals by design, not luck.

Imagining India can be accused of being ambitious in the scope of its solutions. However, there are no small problems in India; problems have to reach mammoth, crisis proportions before they are addressed. Instead of being discouraged, Nilekani forges ahead with large, practical transformational solutions that can be implemented, supported by political will.

Being the co-chairman of Infosys and Time Magazine’s top one hundred most influential people in the world has its advantages. Nilekani has access to Indian and global thought leaders, whose quotes are liberally dispersed in the book. They read like a who’s who of academia, business, science, and politics. Each one enters the scene, like a powerful actor in a movie, to provide authority and credibility to the thesis or antithesis being presented.

I wished that he was kinder to the country’s founding fathers for their paternalistic, socialist tendencies. The British did not leave behind a land of milk and honey. In 1947, India was a deprived, collapsing nation—incredibly poor, very unhealthy, with high infant mortality rates, and low life expectancies. These leaders simply emulated depression-era Keynesian policies of global governments, backed by their unstinted faith in democracy and secularism.

Sixty years ago, we did not have the economic insights that we have today. Despite these six decades of collective learning, the world has still stumbled and we stand at the precipice of a depression, with socialistic winds blowing in the world’s largest free economies.

Even so, Imagining India is a great read that will captivate the curious reader with its detailed perspectives of the past and present, and its challenging, optimistic vision of a twenty-first century India.

I hope India is reading and listening.

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