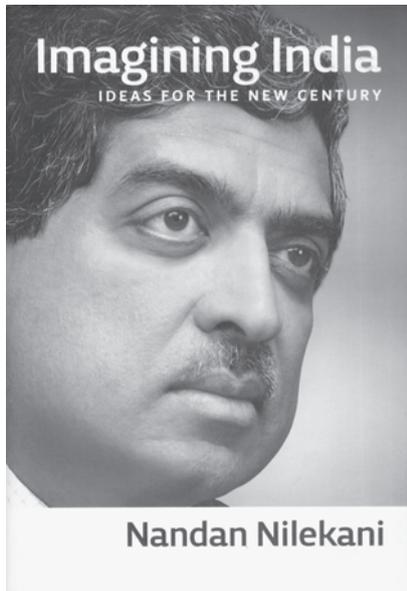


Book Review

IMAGINING INDIA: IDEAS FOR THE NEW CENTURY

N. Ravichandran



Nilekani, Nandan (2008). *Imagining India: Ideas for the New Century*: The Penguin Books India. Price - Rs. 699 (Hardback) Rs. 399 (Paperback).

Nandan Nilekani's book on *Imagining India* is an important landmark in finding strategies between the tension between India and Bharat. Even though the book does not define its audience and readers, it is a useful book for academicians, administrators, policy planners, entrepreneurs and enlightened citizens who are socially sensitive. The book can also be used as an explicit handbook for meaningful problem analysis and policy debate.

Imagining India presents a refreshing view of describing and addressing issues of national importance. This book provides a different view point of looking at problems and issues in the Indian context from a traditional perspective of addressing issues based on caste, religion and region. It is built on the core philosophy of issues related to education, employment generation, security and safety of the citizens, health care related issues and a quality life. According to the author, these issues are relevant and critical to every citizen in the country irrespective of his caste and religion. In this sense, the book is built on the strong foundation, which will lead to a secular outlook in identifying and addressing issues related to India and its transformation to a developed country.

The book is organised in four parts. Part I - briefly describes the ideas/concepts that has gone through a radical transformation in the Indian context. The second part of the book briefly presents a whole range of ideas/concepts, which are accepted by the Indian public in general but are not yet fully settled. The third part of the book deals with concepts where the discussion is alive among the India public. The last and final part of the book deals with the ideas/concepts, which in the opinion of the author, could induce and generate serious discussion in the near future to decide and determine the policy options for the development agenda.

The book is based on an interesting logic, which holds the potential for India as a developed nation. The author acknowledges the fact that economic growth is important in the context of India evolving as a developed nation. The two pillars of growth include expanding access to resources (physical, infrastructural and conceptual) and allowing access to opportunity. According to the author (as it is widely known), the young largely middle class and a vibrant democracy in India are important attractions of this country. According to the author, the

transformation of India into a developed nation would be a function of our ability to reorient ourselves from business-oriented reforms to market oriented reforms.

In the remaining part of the critique of this book, we briefly summarise the ideas discussed in various categories. We do not intend to get a discussion or how these themes have been dealt with in the book. We invite the reader to do on his own, at his pace depending on his taste and curiosity.

Ideas that have arrived:

- Once India was considered to be a country suffering from population burden. Significant amount of administrative resources have been spent in managing the population growth. Today, the Indian population and its significant middle class are seen as an asset for consumption - lead growth. In the Chinese experience of single child norm has its own implications in terms of skewed over aged population. While the disparity in the population growth is varied between different states (in the North and the South), the large Indian population is clearly emerging as an advantage for India, in the near term.
- **Entrepreneurs:** As a nation, we have rapidly moved from Government control licence raj to a private sector lead wealth creation model. India as a country has started recognising the role of entrepreneurs in the national building agenda. There is a growing healthy respect for entrepreneurs.
- **English as a language:** What was seen at one point of time as a symbol of elitism, the English language, has evolved as a medium of instruction in the common language that connects people from various states. It is interesting to note the struggle this country went through in terms of the political process, which lead to a double language formula. The Indian Constitution is written in English (which could be a matter of pride?).
- **Role of computers:** Computers once considered to be a substitute of labour has been accepted as a tool to improve productivity and facilitate growth. The public reservation system implemented by Indian Railways is an important milestone in acknowledging the role of computers in improving our quality of life. A large number of e-governance projects initiated point towards a direction in which the technology is likely to be used most often. In short, IT as an enabler for economic growth has been fully recognised by this country.
- **Connecting to the world:** India has gone through the full cycle of being a dominant partner in world trade to an isolated economy as a consequence of self-reliance. Over a period of time, global investment in India is driven by the talent available and the market opportunities available in the country. Even though, the economic connectivity to India and the rest of the world has a long way to go, slowly but surely, India is economically connecting to the rest of the world.

- **Democracy:** According to the author, British rule laid the foundation of democracy. Even though our democracy is driven by caste, religion and regional considerations, the emergence of the Election Commission and the subsequent electoral reforms have firmly instilled routed the democratic way in this country.

Ideas in progress:

- **Schools:** While our education policy is focused on schools not students, we have created several schools with a centralised process. School is still seen as a business opportunity by the private sector. Our Government spends significant amount of money with no clear impact. The accountability of teachers towards the taught is neither monitored nor factored in. The mid-day meal scheme, a revolutionary policy, encourages children from certain social strata to go to school. The involvement of government in managing local schools is debated widely, but it will happen. The larger issue is how to build student friendly schools in this country...
- **City and slums:** The development of our cities has been characterised by poor planning supported by dated regulatory environment. Land (both in urban and rural areas) is identified as a critical resource. Our cities, over a period of time, have become centres of crowd pulling resulting in an enormous burden on the existing infrastructure (with no addition) in the cities. The ITO, BPO industries are adding to this - chaos and confusion. As a consequence, living in the city is expensive. A large number of population live in sub-optimal, unacceptable conditions.
- **Infrastructure:** There has been very little focus on infrastructure projects post-independence in India leading to poor infrastructure development in this country. In addition, land has been a rare commodity. The golden quadrilateral is not only unique, but bespeaks a quantum leap in the existing infrastructure. The need for a string of seaports and a network of airports is recognised as a critical need for infrastructure development. However, implementation has not been at the required pace. Telephone connections have become a reality. The future of low cost airlines is unclear. As a country of political agenda has moved from roti, kapda, makan to pani, sadak and bijilee. Our elections are based on performance - rather than emotions.
- **Emerging single market:** Regionalisation in India is slowly fading away, but the process needs to accelerate and the implications have to be studied well. Employability, job opportunities, education would minimize the differential in growth rates in various regions. To become a developed nation we should pilot the country towards single consolidated market rather than a large number of pockets of excellence, in isolation.

Ideas to be debated:

- **Economic reforms:** Our economic reforms are not yet complete. They have been predominantly business oriented. The reforms should be routed to a market orientation. Usually, in the Indian context passion and anger precede the logic.

- **Job Opportunities:** Employment and employability would be crucial issues to be addressed by the country in the near future. The agriculture sector has its own limitations. We require innovative approaches to create more jobs. There is a limitation to the jobs that can be created by the State. Hope is based on private investment and entrepreneurship. Education leading to employability would be the key driver in this exercise.
- **Universities:** Our universities need to evolve as Institutions of learning. Instead of advising politician and proposing policy options they become a centre of politics. The quality of university education needs dramatic improvement. The regulator's role should be redefined. Several universities have been started with public investment with very little accountability. The Institution-Industry interface is poor. The research and development are separate institutions and completely insulated from the universities. Private institutions have been started with hope but their impact is varied.

Ideas yet to emerge:

- **ICT in India:** IT is a great enabler, it simplifies processes, and it should be leveraged to deliver quality products and services to the common man. While several e-governance projects are launched, the implementation, progress and impact have been slow. Our land records have been poorly kept. One of the significant applications could be computerisation of records. While our accomplishment in this area would be significant, the future will see more IT and communication enabled services and products.
- **Changing epidemics:** India was known as a poor country. From this status it has moved on to a country, which has dealt with life style diseases. The primary health care network is extensive. However, the impact in the reach is not impressive. Cost of care is neither regulated nor affordable to large segment of operations. The emerging paradigm is preventive care (by Yoga and exercise). The country needs to evolve and launch an impact making public health care policy.
- **Social insecurities:** With joint families giving away to nuclear families, managing old age population is going to be a formidable challenge. Insurance and management of pension funds would be the key enablers in providing secured life for the aged population. According to the author, part of this problem can be resolved by market driven reforms.
- **Environmental issues:** India needs to address issues related to sources of energy. The efforts related to managing and controlling pollution is formidable. The challenges include managing water resources, air pollution control, cleaning of rivers and addressing the energy needs of the country. Preserving forests is going to be another challenging task. India will spend a significant amount of time and energy in managing the climatic conditions.

What is in this book? 'Imagining India' is a portfolio of well-researched, well-known ideas, documented in detail. This is not necessarily interesting to read, thanks to the narrative style of the author. While the book does not contain new ideas (most of these ideas and concepts have been discussed and talked about in the public places with various levels of detail), the unique feature of the book is that it does not provide a solution to several problems addressed in the book. The real strength of the book is that it provides a platform for citizens to debate and discuss policy options, which are critical in transforming India to a developed nation.

Message from the book: The subtle message in this book includes the idea that India should move towards market-oriented reforms. It should rapidly evolve as a single large consolidated market for consumption and employability. Rapid transformation towards private ownership of business would accelerate the growth agenda of the country. India needs to encourage entrepreneurship, leverage ICT and connect to the global market to re-establish its pre-eminent position in trade. Investment in education and knowledge creation would be a pre-requisite in creating an awakened India. Rapid promotion and progress of infrastructure would accelerate the economic reforms in the country. In order to enhance the quality of life, the concerns of the poor should be addressed urgently. Pollution and environmental related issues would need greater attention and investment. The India democracy should be strengthened and protected to make this country as a worthwhile part of the planet to live.

Author's Profile

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N. Ravichandran graduated from **Indian Institute of Technology Madras** in 1980 with specialisation in Applied Probability. He joined **Indian institute of Management Ahmedabad** as faculty in Production and Quantitative Methods Area in 1980.

His teaching and research interests include Applied Probability, Business Process Reengineering, Competitive Strategy, Decision Analysis, Entrepreneurship, Industry Analysis and Corporate Strategy, Information Technology for Competitive Advantage, Logistics and Supply Chain Management, operations Management, Operations Strategy, Quantitative Methods in Management, Simulation and Stochastic Modelling. Since, November 2008, he is the Director at the **Indian Institute of Management Indore**.