

IMAGINING INDIA

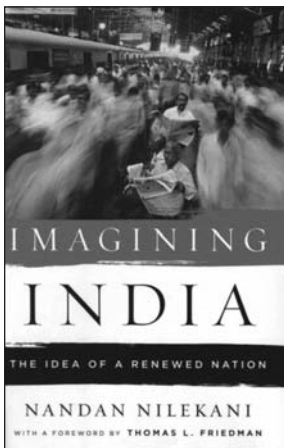
The Idea of a Renewed Nation

BY NANDAN NILEKANI

NEW YORK: PENQUIN PRESS, 2009

528 PAGES, ISBN: 10:-1594202044, HARDBACK

Reviewed by Steven Goldberg



India today has the world's second largest reservoir of skilled workers and a highly educated middle class of almost three hundred million fluent English speakers. Media reports, particularly in the financial press, emphasize galloping economic growth as India chases China for Asian superpower status. Nandan Nilekani, India's IT icon and co-founder of Infosys, shares pundits' enthusiasm for India's breathtaking potential, but intimate knowledge of its daunting challenges tempers his optimism. He is painfully aware that India

is also home to the world's second largest slum and boasts the largest number of illiterate citizens in the world. Nilekani deepens and complicates the American reader's understanding of India while speaking directly to an Indian audience that will determine whether their country achieves its great promise or collapses under the weight of its many burdens: grinding poverty, illiteracy, entrenched social inequities, environmental degradation, bureaucracy, and political corruption. Beyond explaining India, Nilekani diagnoses its ills and prescribes dramatic measures, especially political reforms, meant to combat vested interests and to chart a way forward. Though the task he outlines is Herculean, India's leaders ignore his proposed blueprint at their peril. *Imagining India* conveys a sense of urgency, cautioning that India's opportunity for transformation is both fragile and momentary.

Nilekani confesses that as an avid amateur who delves into history and the social sciences, he cannot claim academic expertise. And although a harsh critic of Indian politics, he admits that he has never run for office. Yet as an IT entrepreneur, philanthropist, and civic-minded resident of Bangalore, Nilekani possesses the breadth of vision and wealth of experience needed to distill the big ideas that inform this timely and important book. He also judiciously intersperses the book with anecdotes and opinions from India's leading intellectuals—among them Nobel Prize winning economist Amartya Sen—lends authority and weight to Nilekani's judgment.

Through the lens of history, the first section traces dramatic shifts in cultural attitudes that have worked to India's lasting benefit. Adoption of the English language, receptivity to population growth as a

source of human capital, economic globalization, and an open democracy all are major strengths that have become encoded in India's DNA.

The second section examines ideas that have gained acceptance but have been unfulfilled due to failed strategies and lack of implementation. Central challenges include primary education, urbanization, infrastructure, and a unified common market. Nilekani next turns to hotly disputed ideas where political ideology and partisanship have stalled progress on important policy questions. Tensions between the ideals of fairness and competition, meritocracy and egalitarianism, play out in ongoing debate over government subsidies, caste-based university admissions and job-guarantees, and restrictive labor laws. Whether government paternalism will yield to free markets, as Nilekani hopes, remains an open question.

The concluding section anticipates potentially overwhelming problems for India that, in his view, are closer than they may appear. Nilekani proposes innovative, even visionary, ideas for addressing the environment, energy demands, and public health. He is confident that because of its relatively low level of development, India can learn from highly developed countries how to avoid the social misery and environmental destruction that historically accompanied industrialization in the West.

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Nilekani's hopes hinge upon the potential of the country's population, now 1.1 billion and climbing, to supply unprecedented human capital for India's new economy. With the notable exception of Indira Gandhi's brutal sterilization program in the 1970's, India's democracy has avoided the coercive methods of China where the population will begin graying after 2010. India's population dividend can be seen today in its lower median age, rapidly growing consumer markets, and expanding pool of skilled workers (e.g., 2.1 million engineers today and an additional 300,000 every year). This "demographic sweet spot" coincides with the effects of landmark economic reforms in 1991 that transformed how government views private industry. Having overcome both Nehru's socialistic legacy and many of the bureaucratic controls of the "license raj," India's government now encourages international trade, entrepreneurship, and the creation of markets.

The greatest success story after liberalization in 1991 is one that Nilekani can tell with authority and pride. IT has brought electronic to India's banking, stock exchange, elections, retail, telecom, and railways. In his view, mass access to IT has revolutionary potential to drive "a stake in corrupt government" and empower citizens. A telling anecdote vividly makes his point. When Karnataka digitized its land records, village accountants no longer could delay an order or tamper with the system in return for bribes. IT removes the corrupt gatekeeper whenever citizens pay utility bills or taxes, file complaints, or apply for documents. Farmers who live in remote areas and lack adequate infrastructure nevertheless can visit a rural IT kiosk for critical information about market prices and weather patterns. Rather than seeing IT narrowly as another technological tool, however

powerful, Nilekani sees its potential as an agent of democratization and enlightened public policy.

Nilekani acknowledges that India's vaunted high-tech sector accounts for less than one quarter of one percent of the country's labor force. He is quick to warn that the stubborn social cleavages that historically have divided India—principally those of caste, language, region, and religion—will only widen and deepen unless the government addresses the urgent question of universal access to quality education.

It is our schools that now delineate our class lines most prominently The collapse of our schools is a deep crack in India's foundation, and it impacts everything from our health achievements and fertility rates to our economic mobility and political choices Our success or failure here will, more conclusively than any other reform, determine India's economic future. (173, 194)

The public university system, including its prestigious Indian Institute of Technology, is chronically underfunded. Since the 1960s, India has funded its schools but neglected schooling. The government has built infrastructure but has not funded needed teacher training, curriculum, effective teaching methods, and performance measurements. India's elites long ago abandoned substandard state schools for high-performing, English-medium private schools.

The poor are largely left behind. Although ninety percent of India's children enroll in state schools, two-thirds drop out by the sixth year and ninety percent drop out before high school. In Nilekani's view, powerful teachers' unions pose the greatest barrier to quality state schooling. Growing discontent has led a significant number of poor families to send their children to private schools, but without vouchers, contends Nilekani, prospects for widespread progress remain severely limited.

Despite his warnings, the bracing optimism of the entrepreneur asserts itself in Nilekani's boldest proposal for social reform. In a massive initiative that would require as much political will as technological savvy, the government would issue biometric national ID cards to its 1.2 billion people. The poor, who often do not have the proof-of-identity documents needed for a range of everyday needs, now would have access to public services ranging from government wheat rations to mobile-phone subscriptions. Since the publication of *Imagining India*, the Indian government has appointed Nilekani as a cabinet-level minister where he will have the resources and power to realize at least one of the exciting possibilities for India's transformation. What higher praise for *Imagining India* than the eagerness of India's government, the chief target of the book's argument and its most important audience, to make Nilekani its valued partner. The high-tech entrepreneur working side by side with the career bureaucrat frames yet another surprising snapshot of contemporary India. Anyone interested in making sense of its changing, often bewildering, images should consult *Imagining India: The Idea of a Renewed Nation*. ■

STEVEN GOLDBERG teaches history and philosophy at Oak Park and River Forest High School. He has authored and edited books in philosophy, the field of his doctorate, and has written articles and review essays for philosophy, history, and education journals and magazines. Goldberg is a table leader for AP World History and a member of the American Philosophical Association's Committee for Pre-College Instruction. He won the NCCS James Becker Award for Global Understanding in 2005 and was a Golden Apple finalist in 1993. Goldberg has traveled widely on Fulbright-Hays scholarships and a Freeman Foundation grant. He also leads student trips to India.

DESTINY DISRUPTED

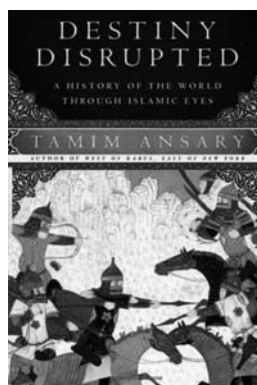
A History of the World Through Islamic Eyes

BY TAMIM ANSARY

NEW YORK: PUBLIC AFFAIRS, 2009

416 PAGES, ISBN: 978-1586486068, HARDBACK

Reviewed by Thomas Frederick Howard



The need for teachers of survey courses in history and geography to cover the Muslim world has become fraught, since 9/11, with a tension that doesn't arise when the subject matter is, say, the Buddhist or Hindu world. Trying to be broadminded, non-Muslim Americans may end up presenting a bland version of the history of Islam that robs the subject of much of its dramatic interest. This book will help to correct that error.

Tamim Ansary grew up in Helmand province in Afghanistan. He comes from an impeccably Muslim background, including descent from a mystic whose tomb is still a shrine. Yet he evidently has spent most of his adult life in the US. He refers to living in Oregon at the time of the OPEC oil embargo in 1973, and he is identified on the dust jacket as being director of the San Francisco Writers Workshop.

He gives a full and fascinating account of the power plays, plots, and assassinations, without being either dismissive or defensive about Islam's essential message.

Working as a history textbook editor in the US gave him the idea of writing a summary of world history as it would be commonly seen in the Muslim world today. The result is a work of high popularization, and can be described without disparagement as a real page-turner.

Ansary moves quickly through the career of Mohammed and spends more time on the period of the first four caliphs and the Umayyad caliphs. The Shia/Sunni split, often a challenge for the outsider, is exceptionally well explained. Ansary is frank about the political and military aspects of the rise of Islam. He gives a full and fascinating account of the power plays, plots, and assassinations, without being either dismissive or defensive about Islam's essential message.

He shows how much of what became distinctive about Islamic civilization was developed by Persians and Turks. His two chapters on the Abbasid caliphate provide an excellent summary of that era's globalization of Muslim thought—the intense and exacting scholarship that