

**IMAGINING INDIA:  
THE IDEA OF A RENEWED NATION**  
by Nandan Nilekani  
Penguin Press, 528 pages, \$29.95

Reviewed by BEN FRUMIN

**T**HE LATE 19TH-CENTURY American author Horatio Alger Jr. made his name and fortune writing more than 100 books that all followed an awfully similar storyline: poor boy prospers. Vim, hard work, determination, honesty—these were the attributes and activities that would ensure a rise from rags to riches in the newly urban, industrializing United States. Alger sold more than 20 million copies of such books. He may have never written the great American novel, but he wrote plenty of novels that made poor Americans believe they could be great.

India does not have its own version of Alger and his hopeful stories, distillations of a dream in which “extremely poor young boys ... struggle upward to build highly successful lives,” as Nandan Nilekani writes in his ambitious, pondering new book. Sure, plenty of Indians have come from nowhere to attain fabulous wealth through admirable effort and startling ingenuity in the last few decades. Mr. Nilekani, the cofounder and cochairman of InfoSys, is one of them. But India’s poor still inherit far too many disadvantages to fairly access India’s newfound economic opportunities. And because a rise from poverty to riches in India seems so unlikely, no Algeresque ragpicker-to-raja myth has taken hold yet. “This part of the economic story has been missing in India’s success,” Mr. Nilekani writes, “and it has made the country’s mood, despite our growth, a bipolar one.”

That’s something Mr. Nilekani hopes

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to help remedy with *Imagining India*, a 500-plus page treatise on the successes, opportunities, dangers and challenges of the country’s past, present and future. Mr. Nilekani’s mission seems to be nothing short of inspiring change that will make India richer, stronger and fairer—because despite India’s incredible achievements of late, the world’s second largest nation is still a terrifically flawed and unfair place. Mr. Nilekani’s is a laudable goal, though one that his book—which is both exhaustive and exhausting—will almost certainly fall short of.

Despite its annual economic growth of more than 6% since the early 1990s, India is a country that “has barely scratched its potential,” Mr. Nilekani writes. It has “enormous advantages in its young population and its entrepreneurs,”—the country’s median age is a shocking 23—“a growing IT capability, an English-speaking workforce and strength as a democracy.” And yet one-third of the population is illiterate; 90% of students drop out before they reach high school; cities are unplanned, sprawling messes; electricity is spotty; roads are clogged, potholed or nonexistent; laws and governance are arbitrary and stilted; and hundreds of millions of people live in poverty.

Mr. Nilekani’s ideas to reform and reinvent India are intriguing. The education system could be improved by increasing competition through school vouchers. A single national tax system would reduce waste and corruption. Subsidies and handouts should be supplanted by “a direct and transparent benefit system.” Citizens should each be identified with a national smart identity card. Still, more often than not, Mr. Nilekani points out problems and suggests big solutions without offering a detailed, realistic plan to achieve his proposed ends.

Another huge obstacle to remaking India, Mr. Nilekani writes, is the politicians

and bureaucrats who are pandering, corrupt, beholden and motivated to oppose any reforms that would knock them from their comfortable perches. In India, “the public service culture prizes process and precedent over progress and results” and “when it comes to policy the urgent wins over the important, tactic triumphs over strategy and patronage over public good.” Further, the organization of Indian politics along lines of caste, religion and class creates parties that formulate position and policy only “to ensure specific benefits for their own group and community.” This must change, Mr. Nilekani rightly believes, though again, his plan for changing such an entrenched political culture is unclear.

Mr. Nilekani is reputedly a brilliant engineer and businessman. But he’s no writer. *Imagining India* is loaded with lame phrases that might sound good in a corporate PowerPoint presentation, but are painful in print: “People are in essence realizing the ‘I’ in IT,” for example. And throughout the book these people are generally referred to as “human capital.” Mr. Nilekani has also apparently never heard a cliché or tired word pairing he didn’t love. In *Imagining India*, thumbs are twiddled, teeth are cut, and feet are held to the fire.

Mr. Nilekani famously inspired Thomas Friedman’s *The World is Flat* by telling

the American journalist several years ago that the global playing field was being “leveled” by technology. Mr. Friedman—a justly celebrated thinker, but also probably the least talented writer ever to win three Pulitzer Prizes—authored the introduction to *Imagining India*, and, in turn, Mr. Nilekani seems to be a graduate of the Thomas Friedman School of Confused Metaphors. Try counting the clashing metaphors and images in this mixed-up sentence from

Mr. Nilekani: “Technology itself is not the Midas touch—however, if we are sufficiently able to get the technology foundation up and running, the change it triggers across the government has the capacity to become a juggernaut.” Penguin editors, what has become of you?

Literary hiccups aside, *Imagining India* is still an important book, if only as a sort of “greatest hits” compilation of things India needs to

do and become in order to thrive in the 21st century. The country’s strange rise over the last two decades has been fantastic and impressive. But the successes of those years and the future opportunities they promise remain overshadowed by the challenges ahead. As Mr. Nilekani writes, “we will either become a country that greatly disappoints when compared with our potential or one that beats all expectations.”

