An Indian Nightmare Is New Delhi Ready for the Twenty-First Century?

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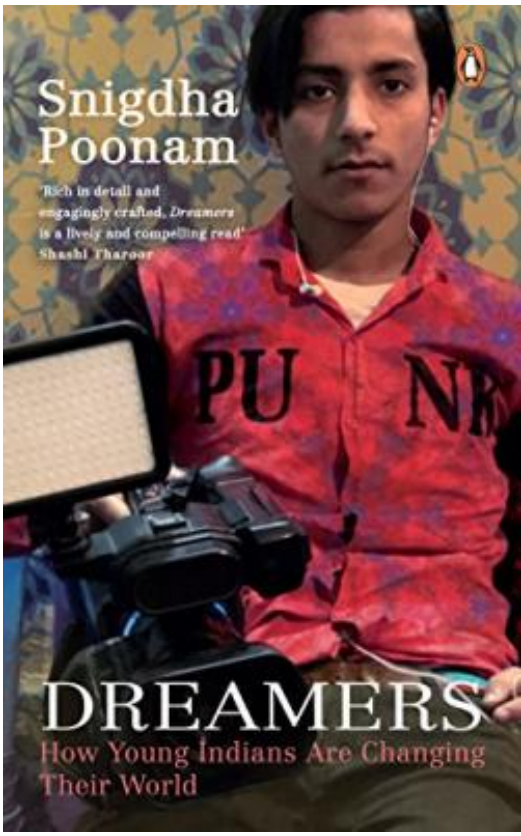
If the end of the twentieth century heralded the dramatic rise of China, many believe that it is India’s turn to claim the

1 https://www.foreignaffairs.com/reviews/review-essay/2018-03-01/indian-nightmare

spotlight at the dawn of the twenty-first. In January, the World Bank loudly proclaimed that India was set to be the fastest-growing major economy in the world in 2018, overtaking its slowing Chinese rival for the top spot. The global consulting giant McKinsey has called the emerging Indian middle class a “bird of gold,” harking back to an ancient aphorism about the country’s dynamic marketplace.



IBM simply refers to the coming age as the “Indian Century.”

A day laborer holds her baby outside a construction site in New Delhi, July 2017. Cathal MacNaughton / Reuters

Despite these glowing projections, India’s future is by no means assured. With the right mix of economic reforms, administrative savvy, and political leadership (not to mention sheer luck), there is no

doubt that India could enjoy widespread prosperity in the coming century. Yet absent such conditions—by no means a given—it faces an unnerving dystopia: one in which the aspirations of hundreds of millions of Indians are foiled rather than fulfilled, with potentially explosive implications for the country's social fabric. This grim scenario is the subject of Dreamers: How Young Indians Are Changing Their World, a harrowing new

book by the Indian journalist Snigdha Poonam.

THE INDIAN DREAM

Predictions of a coming Indian golden age are typically based on two trends. The first is urbanization. Between 2010 and 2050, India’s urban population will grow by as much as 500 million—the largest projected urban population growth in world history. Historically, urbanization has been linked with rising literacy, the

establishment of a middle class, economic dynamism, and increasing cosmopolitanism. The second trend is what economists refer to as the “demographic dividend,” or the economic benefits that accrue to an economy when a massive influx of young people enter the labor force, triggering increases in both economic productivity and the savings rate. At a time when other major economies are graying, nearly one million Indians will join the work force every month until 2030.

According to United Nations estimates, over the next few decades India is expected to account for as much as one-quarter of the projected global population growth among those between the ages of 15 and 64.

Yet in stark contrast to the boosterism surrounding a rising India, the outlines of a much darker alternative narrative are beginning to appear—one where the combined forces of urbanization and demography lead not to a rich dividend but to

a social disaster. This is a future in which India’s urbanization, while creating pockets of wealth creation and prosperity, excludes many more thanks to decrepit infrastructure, poor services, and inadequate opportunity. According to this perspective, India will fall drastically short of creating enough jobs to keep up with its burgeoning labor force, spurring India’s youth to cling more, not less, fervently to identity as a means of finding their way. This resort to identity markers risks

sharpening ethnic divisions and fueling the growth of sectarianism.

This is the world that Poonam explores in Dreamers. In it, Poonam—a national reporter for the Hindustan Times—sets out to understand the aspirations and anxieties of young residents of the vast north Indian Hindi heartland. Like Katherine Boo’s Behind the Beautiful Forevers, Poonam’s book turns its attention to the underbelly of Indian democracy. But this is a

work less concerned with India’s megapolises than the second- and third-tier urban towns that constitute India’s flyover country, where the potential downsides of haphazard urbanization and anemic job creation are most evident.
In Dreamers, readers become richly acquainted with the teeming, pockmarked lanes of Allahabad, Meerut, Patna, and Ranchi.

Poonam calls her young and restless subjects the “Dreamers”

and claims that they are the “most desperate generation of Indians since Independence.” Whereas the children who came of age after India’s independence in 1947 were content with the freedom they wrested from the British Raj, the Dreamers expect their government to actually deliver on the freedoms enshrined in the constitution, such as eliminating status hierarchies in society, minimizing the unequal concentration of wealth, providing gainful employment,

and guaranteeing social protection. Empowerment must come between elections, not simply during them.

Unfortunately, Poonam argues, Indian democracy shows few signs of attaining such lofty ideals. Today, the bulk of India’s youth bulge falls into at least one of three categories she calls the three “Es”: uneducated, unemployed, or unemployable. The problem with India’s education system is not schooling but learning. At the

primary level, India is approaching universal enrollment. Yet over half of all students enrolled in the sixth grade cannot read a story suitable for second graders. One-tenth cannot even recognize the numbers one through nine.

These failures exist at every rung of the ladder. A recent assessment of Indians between the ages of 14 and 18 conducted by the nongovernmental organization

Pratham produced a slew of depressing statistics: 40 percent cannot tell the time looking at an analog clock, 36 percent do not know the capital of India, and 62 percent cannot compute a ten percent discount on a given price. Higher education has become a lucrative business in India, leading to a surge in university enrollments. Between 2000 and 2015, according to the political scientist Devesh Kapur, India established almost six new colleges every single day. Barring a few isolated examples,

however, these institutes are a classic case of quantity over quality.

The second crisis relates to the lack of jobs. The Indian economy needs to create roughly one million jobs each month just to keep up with the natural growth in the labor force. The government's own estimates suggest that India is creating between 350,000 and 400,000 a month. Those who are not lucky enough to find employment in the

formal sector join the growing hordes trying to make ends meet in the informal sector. A big part of the problem is that unlike its East Asian neighbors, India adopted a “precocious” economic model that leapfrogged manufacturing altogether and went straight into services.

The trouble with this model is that not every Indian can become a software engineer; establishing a robust manufacturing base is the only

tried-and-true strategy for mass employment generation. Unfortunately for India, it is not only failing to industrialize, it is prematurely deindustrializing. Frustrated job seekers have increasingly turned to the public sector.

Unfortunately for them, the number of government posts has been consistently shrinking for the last two decades. This explains the absurd sight of more than 2.3 million Indians rushing to apply for 350

government positions to serve as lowly office helpers, as happened in 2015. The most perverse twist is that despite India’s abundance of labor, industry struggles mightily to recruit qualified workers. A 2016 report studied 150,000 engineering students across the country, only to find that 80 percent of them are unemployable according to industry standards

BLEAK HOUSE

India’s labor market pains are matched by equally grave woes when it comes to urban infrastructure, which are not only inhibiting urban growth but also deforming it. In an evocative chapter on the north Indian city of Allahabad, Poonam has this to say about her arrival in the city: “Nowhere else in India I’ve been has the conflict between the past and present of a place resulted in a more disastrous outcome. The broken

jampacked roads, the half-finished buildings, the open drains and the thick haze of dust that greet you outside the station are the result of the same things that make the whole of second-tier India one giant pothole: crazy construction, overcrowding, civic collapse.”

India’s inability to generate adequate jobs and its struggle to ensure its cities are livable are, of course, symptoms of a larger issue: the spectacular

failure of the state to perform its sovereign functions. As the government has proven incapable of providing basic services to its citizens, those with means have simply exited, resorting instead to private doctors, teachers, and security guards. The belief that the state is able and willing to deliver basic amenities to its people has evaporated.

The result is not simply a substitution of private provisioning for public goods but also an attitudinal shift that

pushes Indians to find work-arounds that often involve illegality and cutting corners. Many Dreamers, Poonam argues, have become cheaters. The most disturbing example she marshals is the cottage industry of call center fraudsters she manages to penetrate in New Delhi. Poonam uncovers entire neighborhoods specializing in scamming young Indians by asking them for up-front payments in order to land a good-paying job that will never materialize. “In Delhi, you can’t

become an important man without pulling some kind of fraud," one wayward call center recruiter explains to Poonam with a smile.

In Poonam's telling, even those who start on the straight and narrow succumb to the temptation of exploiting others since they have been so thoroughly exploited themselves. Take the case of aspiring actor Mohammed Azhar, who gets repeatedly ripped off by casting directors as

he struggles to piece together a career. In the book, we watch the innocent, defeated Azhar slowly transform into the type of unscrupulous scamster that preyed on a younger version of himself. “I couldn’t blame him for thinking that cheating is essential to success,” Poonam writes. “He didn’t know a single person who became rich without cheating his way up.”

However disturbing Poonam’s revelations are, her stories of despair do not completely

displace stories of hope. The most gripping of these is the tale of Richa Singh, a young woman who has the audacity to stand as a candidate for student union president at Allahabad University. Singh is running in order to correct a routine but illustrative practice of gender discrimination: she and her friends simply want to hang out at the teashop outside the student union, where women are forbidden. Facing both the threat and the actual use of violence by angry young men

for the crime of defying social customs, Singh improbably wins the election.

THE INDIAN CENTURY?

Children celebrate the festival of Diwali in Mumbai, October 2017.

These heartwarming victories, however, cannot obscure the fact that something has gone seriously amiss in the Indian growth story. The failure of the

state to exploit the advantages of urbanization and India’s demographic shifts, if not remedied quickly, will lead to two adverse outcomes. The first is a deepening of already worrying levels of inequality. A recent paper by the economists Lucas Chancel and Thomas Piketty found that the proportion of national income accruing to the top one percent of India’s income earners is now at its highest level since the creation of the Indian income tax in 1922.

The second outcome is the cancerous growth of sectarian rage. Poonam takes readers on a chilling tour of frustrated young men who have become foot soldiers in the service of a virulent strain of Hindu nationalism. As the author puts it, “They have enrolled themselves in the battle to protect Hindu identity, but what they are really fighting for is their shot at any identity at all.” Far from decreasing the salience of sectarian attachments, India’s

demographic shifts might be increasing them. In state after state, young Indians have begun agitating for ethnic quotas that would guarantee their communities a slice of lucrative public sector jobs. The youth who have flocked to the streets to voice their dissatisfaction hail from social groups not on the bottom rungs of the ladder, but near the top. Angry about affirmative action given to traditionally disadvantaged communities, they are now

demanding protections for themselves.

How the Indian state manages the dual pressures posed by urbanization and demographic change will define the nature of Indian democracy itself. Will its citizens prioritize economic growth or social justice? Will they continue a proud tradition of liberal democracy or succumb to the temptations of majoritarian democracy? It is hard to come away with a feeling of optimism after reading

Poonam’s incisive account. Many of the disenchanted Dreamers, she writes, are aggrieved about the same thing: “that they have no future in this country, and it has no future in the world.”

Dreamers smashes the slick hype that has been constructed around India’s aspiring middle classes, calling our attention to the corruption, frustration, and dashed hopes bubbling beneath the surface. It may be convenient for India’s elites to whitewash these inconvenient

truths. But, as Poonam shows, it would also be suicidal.

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