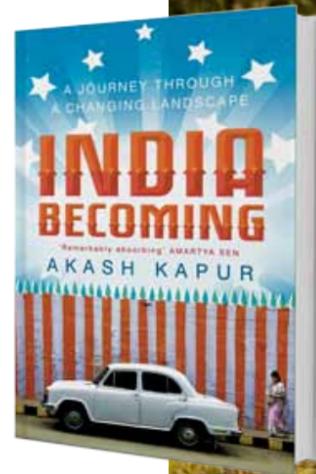


The Good, The Bad and The Becoming

*Akash Kapur, author of the lucid and insightful **India Becoming: A Portrait of Life in Modern India, on coming back, on development and its pitfalls and the 'shining' bit***

Interview and photograph by SEBASTIAN CORTES

Akash Kapur's *India Becoming: A Portrait of Life in Modern India*, which was released late last year, looks at the country's economic development and the cultural and social changes it has brought in the last two decades. Kapur's debut non-fiction work, which was rated highly by many critics, will also be released in French and Marathi. Kapur, who studied at the Harvard and Oxford universities, has written for the likes of *The New Yorker* and *The Economist* and used to write a fortnightly column titled



'Letter from India' for the *International Herald Tribune*. Kapur, 38, left India over two decades ago, but returned for good in 2003, with what he now considers naïve enthusiasm. "I grew up here," he says. "This was home, and I always wanted to come back. The opportunities there didn't make up for the sense of alienation. But here, the opportunities come with tons of pitfalls, and that's kind of what I'm trying to get at in the book." He had been back on short holidays to visit his parents, an American schoolteacher mother and a Punjabi businessman father, both of whom still live in Puducherry. But that, he says, "is very different from coming back for good and have your kids grow up here and sort of stake your future on this place. Things get more complicated." Excerpt from an interview.

What makes your book different from past overviews on India?

I think there are a couple of things: certainly the geographical focus is unique, not simply that I focus on south India, but also the fact I pay attention to the rural reality. Most books on India have looked at the urban reality in cities. Also, when I started the book, much of what was being written was in the India Shining narrative, with very positive observations of where India was and the possible direction of change. I have tried to write something that I consider to be more balanced and nuanced and look at both sides of India's development.

What about your stylistic approach?

I think that when you write a book, you don't consciously try to make a "different" book. Those are marketing concerns that are unhealthy for a writer to worry about. As a writer, you write the book that you set out to do and you look at

what you're interested in. Stylistically, I made no serious or conscious effort to be vastly different.

During your time at Harvard you studied social anthropology. Do you see any patterns of development that are unfolding in India or is it all simply chaos?

I think development has always been inherently chaotic unless it's being controlled by a communist top-down state in which case, it often does not really come off as development. It's hard to answer, I don't think there is a system to capitalist development and I think part of the beauty of capitalism is that it evolves organically, as a genuine response to what a society needs and what it wants. That implies a certain level of chaos, which is probably multiplied in a country as complex and with such a vast population as India. We have an element of chaos in what is going on in India now but, if this concept makes any sense, I believe that it's chaos with a purpose. The famous economist John Kenneth Galbraith once said that "India was functional anarchy" and I think what he said then probably holds true now.

"I DON'T SEE THIS BOOK AS BEING WORKABLE AS AN ARTICLE, I FEEL THAT MY OPINIONS AND FEELINGS ARE HEAVILY EXPRESSED. THIS IS A BOOK ABOUT PEOPLE'S LIVES AND I'M CONNECTING THE DOTS"

Is anyone drawing out a master plan for India?

Well, I really don't think that is how life works. One of the reasons the book stays away from big theories of development and doesn't talk about big policy

issues and doesn't go to Delhi and interview politicians is because that is not where I see things happening. I see it all happen in the element of lived lives and I don't feel the models and theories really matter. If you want to understand the Indian situation, you have to understand the life of the people. That is where you are going to capture the complexity of what is happening in India now.

Your title uses the word becoming, which would seem to indicate a bettering of the status quo.

Yet your characters seem to float in multiple directions. What is the message you wish the reader to pick up on?

I don't think of 'becoming' as an improvement. My sense of the word becoming is a state of transition. What you say of my characters is true, but like in any human life, they are conflicted by trying to figure out where they are going and I see that reflected in the becoming of the country. I don't see the development process as a Western import that India is trying on. Certainly we find elements of that in the consumerism and the hyper-shopping, which are clear imported traits that have been quickly absorbed, but I don't see that as a major problem of development. I see powerful forces that unleash

energies and certain elements of positive creativity subject to extreme chaos and that, to me, is interesting. I don't see an Indian model of development, which is to be contrasted to a Western model.

Which non-fiction or fiction book or writers have inspired you in the India context?

Maximum City (by Suketu Mehta) was certainly a brilliant book and then, V. S. Naipaul's *India: A Million Mutinies Now* has certainly influenced an entire generation of writers, even for what he gets terribly wrong. His approach to writing was certainly influential and I can often find myself re-reading it.

I felt that you had chosen to keep a clinical distance from your characters and a sense of 'understatement.' Does this come from your Anglo-Saxon training and your New York Times objectiveness or are you trying to examine anti-heroic characters that seem to fall under the radar?

I don't really know what to say as the reviews have also picked up on this and I think it reflects the fact that there is an 'I' in the book and the extent to which the 'I' narrator is involved in the story. Some reviewers wonder why I'm in the book at all. And then some say that there is too much distance. So, I don't really understand this idea of a 'clinical distance'. I don't see this book as being workable as an article; I feel that my opinions and feelings are heavily expressed. This is a book about people's lives and I'm connecting the dots, but I'm interested in them expressing their doubts and fears.

Certainly, part one of the book has a more distant quality than the more emotional second part.

Did you ever really buy into 'India Shining'?

Somebody asked me that and went as far as to say that I have set myself up as falsely naive to

gain effect in the book. This is not true. I really believed in it and my return from the US was prompted by curiosity. I was certainly aware of the problems but I was confident. I looked at the more positive aspects of India's transformation and that's what I focused on. I still see those positive sides. Having seen India in the '70s and '80s, what happened in the late '90s was quite impressive, exciting and marvellous. We were breaking from the lethargy of the past, which left the country without energy and asleep.

So the term India Shining was not incorrect?

No! It was not! I say it in the book and my book is not a negative take on what is happening in the country. Amazing and wonderful things are happening and powerful forces are being unleashed, which, over the past ten years, have shown also a dark side, a price to be paid. And I don't think the benefits will come without the costs. And I don't suggest that India could have taken other paths to development.

One of the main characters Sathy moans the loss of his 'standing' and social position, much like the landed gentry did in Europe with the arrival of capitalism and the growth of the mercantile class. His mismatched marriage also seems to speak of a clash of social views. Hari, the shopaholic homosexual, and Naresh, the left-leaning journalist, all seem to express a sense of loss.

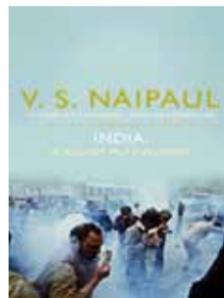
I think, to be fair to my characters, we have to understand that we live in confusing times and are not entirely sure where we are heading or what we really want. There seems to be a normal longing for stability, which may have been more prevalent in the old order. The sleepy and stultified times of India's past had simple rules, which many times hide horrible truths. Sathy is more profound than you make him out to be. While he moans of his situation on a personal level, he actually has a level of introspection and awareness about

the macro situation that is rather interesting. He seems to be aware and understands that the old order must be displaced for the country to evolve, however difficult it may be for him to accept. The fact is that the young men in his village contest his authority and while it harms him financially and psychologically, he accepts that maybe it's a good thing for the country. That sense of duality and confusion is what many people are dealing with. Positioning within the duality is one of the major challenges. The complexity of India makes it a much more difficult animal to tame and understand, as it gallops the process of accelerated and uneven growth. Also, the speed of change has many people unable to keep up with their own changes. •



V. S. Naipaul

CORBIS



Suketu Mehta

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