

# An Open Letter to India

*Is the Indian boom finished? The country's growth index was recently pegged at its lowest level in a decade. The fiscal year ending in March saw growth drop off 6.5 percent, down 8.4 percent from 2011. Worst hit have been the manufacturing, mining and agricultural sectors. Particularly unsettling were numbers from the first trimester of 2012, with growth up only 5.3 percent, down from the 9.2 percent in 2011. Weakening private sector investments and the overall effects of the ongoing European financial crisis have helped fuel the downturn. Yet India's fundamentals remain strong. The local financial system is protected, the country has solid reserves, and the central bank is efficient. But numbers don't lie and critics are increasingly assailing what they consider an antiquated government hindered by a fragmented, regionally biased opposition. Is there any hope of ending the slowdown? If it exists, it resides in the strong and uncompromising nature of the Indian character.*

by Carlo Pizzati

Paramankeni, Tamil Nadu state

My dear India,  
Thanks for not being offended when I look at your chaotic streets through a car window and think out loud that you host the world's most elegant poor people.

You're not insulted. In fact, you laugh instead. You show that big white smile of yours and let me go on my way, along with your 1.2 billion souls.

This is the attitude that first won me over. After getting over the surprise at seeing so many men in turbans crouch and empty their bowels on your morning streets, I was immediately seized by a kind of deep calm. The heat, smog, traffic, chaos (and its brother, stress), I could deal with them all.

But now you're "Modern." You are the "Modern India." Yet that smile seems so ancient, so enduring. It's livelier than that of Mona Lisa and more robust than the one worn by enigmatic Europe. Modern, maybe, be resistant to it at the same time. That stolid Indian smile and your nodding tells me you're at least listening to me, even if you might not agree with all I say.

I've loved from the start. That you should know. I loved you when I was a kid in elementary school and read Rud-

yard Kipling, envying Phileas Fogg's journey from Bombay to Calcutta. I remember a TV series based on Kipling "Jungle Book" and the line "Kali, Kali, Kali, this woman must die"; I laughed at Mowgli; I was moved by Tagore; I let Mohandas Gandhi, the "Great Soul," change my heart forever. But even though I always loved you, I only got to know you in person in recent years. I have to tell you, India, that you once scared me: You and your diseases and agony of your poverty. Mental ghouls undid me. Yet once you embraced me, all the doubts vanished. They

Boys cavorting on a Chennai beach.

didn't come back even when I saw a leper, his face wrapped in cloth, cross a street in Chennai or Triplicane. Or when I saw an old man by a roadside, dying in rags near Royapettah. He tried to get up but couldn't.

I never found the fears I thought you'd afflict me with. I found serenity your swirl of horns, your shouting, and your pushy people eager to shove and cut into lines (I grew up in Italy, remember...)

So now you're modern.

But that makes me ask, 'What's happening to you, Mother India?' I was lucky enough to see deep into you, into the part the world calls rural India. I avoided the elec-



Epa / Corbis / G. Nathan

troshock treatment that comes from being in Mumbai or Delhi.

The actor Kabir Bedi (of Italian “Sandokan” TV fame) once me that Mumbai was just too chaotic for him. He was trying to write his memoirs but couldn’t. Then there’s my friend Sandeep, who drives through Delhi in his BMW, dressed to the hilt in the latest fashion, who kept telling me, “You have to come here. This is where you can really have fun.”

That may be why I didn’t go. In the meantime Sandeep, in his 30s, takes off for America with his girlfriend on a vacation, or heads for Barcelona or goes skiing in the Himalayas. He embodies the miracle modern India, trendy, casual, confident, but never arrogant.

I have avoided your urban side. I instead went looking for you in your provinces.

I went south to the sacred temples at Tiruvannamalai. I ran barefoot with a million pilgrims around the holy

mountain of Arunachala chanting the “om namah Shivaya” mantra.

The newspapers say that the Hindu fundamentalist party, the BJP, is growing in strength. They say there’s an upsurge in the lynching of Christians and Muslims. But this is a part of your being modern, at least in your way. It’s the darker side of your attitude. I wonder sometimes if the global anarchy Robert Kaplan has written about it headed your way? Are you, too, “Africanizing” yourself? I don’t think so. Not yet. Given your economic disparities and your packed demographics, and the dreams peddled by TV and billboards, you still provide an ample sense of security.

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ABOVE Residential housing in Bangalore, India’s Silicon Valley.

BELOW Rice harvesting in Tiruvannamalai, in Tamil Nadu.

BELOW Woman with her son among burned pumpkins in Allahabad.



Ap Photo / R.K. Singh



Corbis / D. Lehman

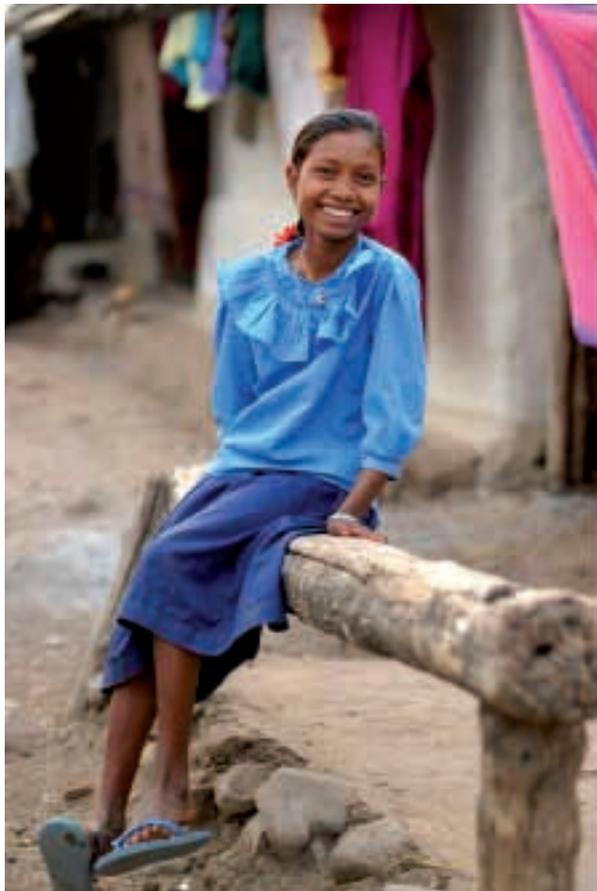


Robert Harding World Imagery / Corbis / A. Owen

I've talked to so many of your "children" in recent years, including the old money industrialist from Chennai, who knows Bassano del Grappa better than I do. I've spoken to the chemical company boss who worries about the women who still commit suicide as a result of the dowry system. Some people get married just to collect in-law money, then repudiating their wives, who are ruined and would prefer to die.

The editor of major newspaper tells me it's all going to be fine. A mutual friend, a critic and journalist, says it's all going to hell. My newspaper friends remain convinced that writing and reporting are raising awareness and working to unite everyone in a humane effort to improve collective conditions. Journalism still counts here, as does the opinion of intellectuals (it's true, almost unbelievably).

My naturalist friend Shekhar makes documentaries. He



Majority World / LaPresse

worries that wildlife is vanishing. No one cares, he says. It's not a priority. What matters is climbing the G20 ladder, after which, as an addendum, people will think of the fate of rare frogs, snakes, birds, tigers and elephants. But by then it will be too late, says Shekhar. The threat to forests is real. And after the forest comes the water.

Mother India, did you know that people are already fighting over your water on the border with China? Some say that's where the next war will come from. The new world order puts the real fight in rural India.

That's not what I saw in Shekawati, in Rajasthan, vil-  
**T**las left over from your boom of a century ago. It's not what I saw in Mysore, Karnataka's largest city and not from Bangalore, where I lived modestly for a month. It's certainly not what I saw in the tourist cities of Kerala, like Kovalam, Varkala, nestled among Munnar tea plantations. Here, the casualties are from suicide and alcoholism. That, too, say some, is part of modernity.

On my way home I came upon rural Tranquebar, a Tamil fishing village, where I met Francis. He's one of t-

FACING PAGE A man feeds birds near the Mumbai waterfront.  
 LEFT Despite poverty, Indian smiles are abundant.

## PARTY OVER

Interview with Akash Kapur  
 on "India Becoming," Penguin-Riverhead, 2012.

**Auroville (Tamil Nadu)** – By night, I drive along a dark and dirty road, slowing down to avoid hitting turbaned cyclists who appear suddenly from local side streets. I finally make it to Auroville. In a parking lot, sitting on his motorcycle, is author Akash Kapur. Kapur has just published a book, "India Becoming" (Riverhead-Penguin, 2012).

Auroville, about three hours from Chennai, is easy to get lost in. Kapur lives here with his wife Auralice and their two sons Aman and Emil. Their house is elegant, patiently built up over years.

Sprayed with mosquito repellent, we order a take-out pizza and begin chatting in his garden. "I've had dengue fever once and that's enough," he tells me.

A journalist and writer, Kapur is the son of a mixed couple,



Ap Photo / M. Swarup

an American mother and an Indian father. He's thin, affable, and intelligent, with a cheerfulness that shifts from the gracious to the biting.

I'm intrigued by his book, subtitled, "A Portrait of Life in Modern India." It's among the first 21st-century books to pay close attention to damage produced by recent developmental spurts, instead of simply singing the praises of India's growth and endless potential.

Kapur lived and studied in the United States starting at age 16, returning to India in 2003 after graduating from Harvard and accepting a Rhodes Scholarship to Oxford. He found a different country from the one he remembered. He says changes that were fundamentally altering the country's social fabric.

His book is a kind of travelogue that takes in both cities and countryside, and the classes within them. It's a vivid portrait of lives transformed, for better or for worse, by economic growth. He focuses on rural India, where prosperity has been come with declines in agriculture and traditional lifestyles, producing a wholesale cultural transformation.

India has experience boom years. Your book asks the question, "Is the party over?" What's the answer?

In a sense the party is over, yes, but in a positive way. India has amazing long-term prospects and there are lots of reasons to celebrate. But in the last 10 to 20 years, the country has turned a blind eye to the remaining obstacles. It has been unwilling to face all the problems that persist notwithstand-



wo general managers of the Neemrana chain of hotels, which has locations throughout the country. He travels to each one as often as possible to take the pulse of Mother India. He's a Frenchman who's lived here for 40 years. At dinner he tells me of the India of another time and how it's changed. He rues the disappearance of age-old traditions, with mobile phones and Internet rule taking their place. He tells me of droves of young Europeans arriving in Delhi, Calcutta, Mumbai, hoping to be part of the New Century and help lay the groundwork for a nation that exudes optimism and is eager to grow. Sure, growth has slowed, from 8.4 percent to 6.5 percent, but it's still there.

FACING PAGE Arch in front of Tranquebar.



ing economic boom. In fact, the boom has caused some. Ignoring these issues gives you a sense of liberation and exultation, as I mentioned before.

But now, my country is just beginning to become more realistic about its prospects. Realism is always positive force, but it does tend to put a damper on partying.

Your book contains an interview with a landowner named Sathy who suggests that modernity is actually killing people. Do you agree?

Has modern been a plus or a minus, or both?

Part of what he says is true. I note the many ways India and Indians are suffering as a result of modernity. But again, "partly true" needs saying. The other side of the coin is that millions of Indians have benefited modernity and the recent economic boom.

It's hard to quantify what been lost in terms of what's been gained. Development is a complex phenomenon, so is progress, even though some write about it simplistic terms,

as if everything one side was wonderful and the other side terrible. It doesn't work that way.

I'm ambivalent about the transformation and I think it's a vantage point shared by many Indians. In many ways it's exciting, in others it's terrible.

The notion of "creative destruction" is useful when you think what's happening in India today. Creativity and destruction act simultaneously in this country. It's part of what makes India an intensely attractive place for those have to write about and analyze trends. Though India has always been a complicated place, I really do think that complexity has been exacerbated.

In one of the final chapters of you provide an excellent description of "goondagiri," the organized crime mentality, both small and big-time. Is it a reversible trend?

In using "goondagiri" I'm not just referring to organized crime. It is an attitude toward life that functions outside the

You can also feel it here, Tranquebar, or better said, Taramghambadi, which means "the village of the singing waves." It's a Tamil word, which contained a prophecy. In 2004, the waves sang a requiem hundreds of fishermen swept away in the December tsunami, one slice of the 180,000 victims. But thanks to a joint development fund between a local corporation and the Indian government, a great deal has been rebuilt. There are new craft businesses managed by women.

Mother India, your future also begins here. I think of the diligent fisherman I met one afternoon on the beach in front of my house. His boat engine had broken down and he had no water. I went fetched a bottle and some biscuits and handed them over. He wanted to know if I liked living in Tamil Nadu. Of course I do, I told him. Then the mechanic showed up with the part to repair his broken engine. The hungry fisherman told me about his village, where all now have motor craft. Rowing and sailing are a thing of the past. "Oh, I know it," I replied, "since I wake up every morning to the sounds of your engines."

The engine is fixed. The fisherman smiles and thanks me. He then shoves off and returns to his routine of trawling the Bay of Bengal with his nets in tow.

New India, you're unstoppable.

but also cite activist and lawyer Vinod Shetty, who said, "If you want change, you have to swallow your anger."

First, I don't think Vinod was tugging at the old cliché that Indians are passive and ready to accept their lot because of karma and so on. I think what he's saying, rather, is that the best way to produce change is to work within the system, and not adopt radical revolutionary traits. He's talking about non-violent change that occurs in incremental steps.

This is a key point as it regards democracy. And I think it explains why India, despite the terrible inequalities and poverty, hasn't experience the kind of revolution seen in many non-democratic Third World nations.

Democracy works as a kind of safety valve, venting dissatisfactions and bluntly allowing for popular discontent that otherwise pent up would explode into a revolution. All this doesn't mean that that democracy cancels out the poverty and the inequality. Far from it. But it helps calm things down and produces moderation, giving those at the bottom of the ladder the illusion of having a voice.

concept of laws, one that's characterized by random, spontaneous violence.

Can be stopped and reversed? Police reform would certainly help, as would the streamlining of the Indian court system, which is responsible but badly backlogged. People often turn to violence because they think that even if the criminal perpetrators are caught, trying them could take years and they'll be out on bail in no time. As it stands now, the law and existence of established order isn't much of a deterrent.

You taker readers through the slums of Dharavi, in Mumbai, which was made famous by Danny Boyle's movie "Slumdog Millionaire." You warn against poverty clichés