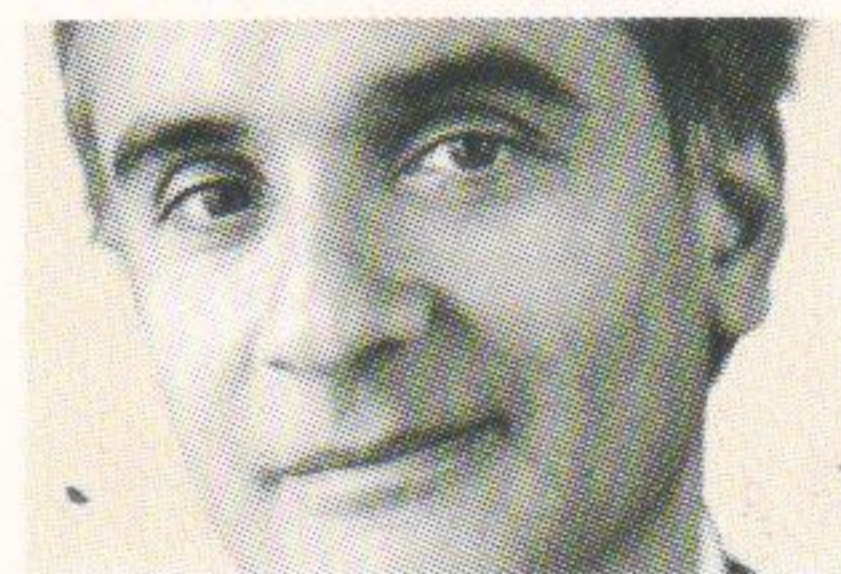


Pico Iyer



The Indian Disconnect

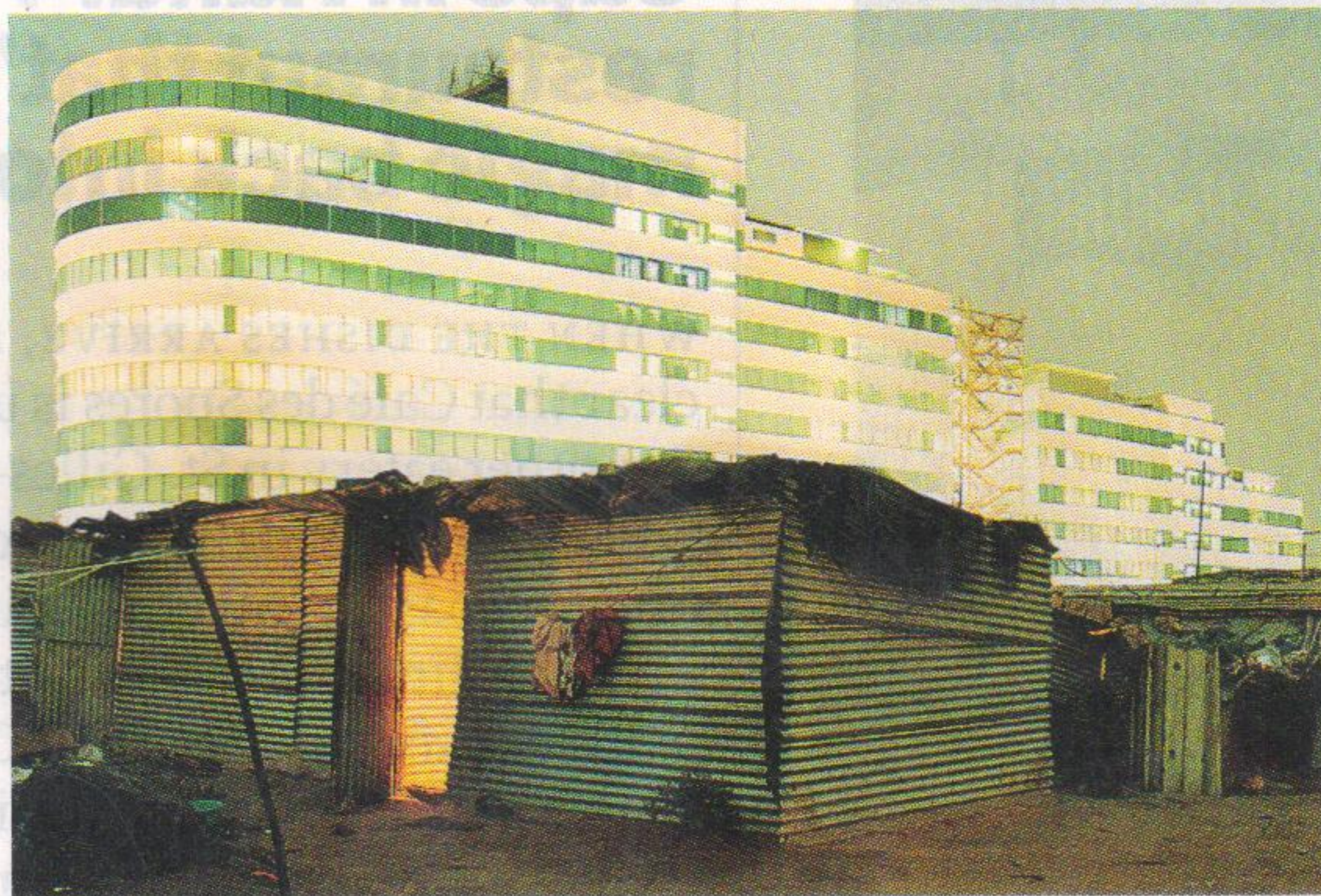
The nation is rapidly modernizing, but its age-old inefficiencies persist

WHEN I FLEW INTO HYDERABAD'S state-of-the-art airport last fall, I hadn't visited the city for 37 years. I found the airport filled with information desks. Alas, the men behind them professed to have no information at all. There were "free-Internet terminals" near many gates—but I could use them only, I was told, if I paid. Since my "super-luxury" hotel had failed to provide the airport pickup it had repeatedly promised, I took myself to a "prepaid taxi" booth. There I discovered that, even in India Rising, prepaid taxis are neither prepaid nor taxis. Two teenagers slipped the prepaid official 20 rupees (about 40 cents), he handed me a receipt—and I ended up in an ancient (private) car that could barely move. They gained, the prepaid official gained, and the only loser was, as ever, the innocent newcomer.

My destination happened to be the largest tourist attraction in India (outside of the Taj Mahal)—Ramoji Film City—but the boys had not a clue how to get there. We entered a gleaming new expressway only to realize that it had no lights and very few signs (the sole consolation was that the ubiquitous TOLLBOOTH AHEAD notices led to no tollbooths). Finally juddering up to my hotel sometime after 1 a.m., I was told that I had to pay 840 rupees—though the receipt called for 740—because the trip had taken so long. I got to my \$200-a-night room and tore open the "executive kit" in its desk. Inside were two paper clips.

Such trifling tragicomedies have been, of course, the stuff of travelers' tales about India for centuries, even if they come, as in this case, from someone who's 100% Indian by blood. But in the face of India's bold new slogans and hopes for itself, they carry a fresh and somewhat bitter poignancy. More Indians have access

to cell phones than to toilets, Akash Kapur writes in his impressively lucid and searching forthcoming book, *India Becoming*, while 93% of Indians still work outside the formal economy. At a time when the latest stereotypes of India revolve around IT billionaires and 8% growth rates, the number of undernourished Indians is, in harrowing fact, on the rise. And even by official estimate, 70% of India's surface water is polluted.



Gleaming, high-rise India Just ignore the shacks

When Kapur writes about lawlessness, chaos and corruption, he could be writing 30 or 100 years ago; such complaints are as ageless as India itself. It's when he trains his zoom lens on individuals caught in the country's million mutinies that he reveals the subtler challenges that have accompanied economic gain. Women now work, but, as one marketing professional tells him, she can't "outsource" pregnancy. Gays can come out a little, but they don't always know how, or how much. And as fast as villagers flood into cities, urban problems are seeping into the countryside. *India Becoming* (the title nicely refrains from saying what India is becoming) reveals a nation torn between a confounding

future and a past that refuses to go away.

Many of the same discrepancies haunt China, of course, and if India's brazen self-confidence is partly a reflection of its innocence of the larger world, it has that in common with the U.S. Indeed, India's indomitable storehouse of optimism may be one of its most enduring advantages; some of the planet's fastest minds have thrived not because but in spite of one of the slowest systems. By contrast with a China or Japan, India's strengths lie not in groups but individuals, with the result that the whole will always be less than the sum of its often dazzling parts.

But Kapur's larger point is a sobering one: the country's glorious visions for itself run far ahead of both reality and realism.

Kapur should know: having gone through Harvard and Oxford, he returned to his hometown of Auroville in Tamil Nadu several years ago in the hopes of raising his kids in a quieter, saner environment than he could find in the U.S. What he found, of course, was a country longing to move in the opposite direction and become the U.S.

In his clarity, sympathy and impeccably sculpted prose, Kapur often summons the spirit of V.S. Naipaul. But he

most resembles the older writer in the way he finds in his country's tensions a reflection of his own: the son of an Indian father and an American mother, and raised in the multicultural experiment that is Auroville, Kapur is uniquely placed to discern the way a person, or place, may be torn in opposite directions. India trumpets its many remarkable achievements, yet sometimes seems in danger of losing the very bright, concerned, multilingual global souls (like Kapur) who may, in fact, be its single best hope. In Cyberabad, as Hyderabad now calls itself, I saw the high-rises of Google and Microsoft and Facebook. But it still proved impossible, much of the time, to get online.