

Nandan Nilekani confident of changing India with ideas

Can ideas change a nation? Co-founder of Indian software giant Infosys and author Nandan Nilekani believes that they can, even if it takes a long time for them to become embedded in the collective psyche of the country.

'The process of change has to start somewhere. Rome was not built in a day. People will have to make it happen. They can start building on the broad based concepts of democracy, information technology, population or demography, globalisation, English and ideas. No country in the world has all these six things together. It is unique to India,' Nilekani told IANS in an interview.

He was in the national capital Monday for the launch of his book 'Imagining India: Ideas for the New Century', which has been published by Penguin India. The book is the first in the series of Penguin's 'Allen Lane - The Imprint of Ideas' releases in India. The imprint, launched in 1967, is named after the founder of the publishing house.

'Imagining India' probes India's growth story over the last 60 years, examines the central ideas that have shaped modern India and offers perspectives on the past, present and the future.

Nilekani writes about how India's early socialist policies, despite the good intentions and idealism, stifled growth and weakened democracy.

The book analyses how the country's overwhelmingly young population has now become its greatest strength - and how IT is refashioning not just India's businesses, but also its governance and everyday life.

Nilekani does not stop at listing the ongoing processes of change, but plunges deeper into the heart of Indian real polity to debate about caste, politics, labour reforms, infrastructure, environment, markets and higher education.

'It is all about ideas. Ideas happen not because of diktats, but because society starts believing that the ideas are the best for them.

'For instance, the idea of English in India began as a language of outsourcing by the British - forging a collective linguistic unity. But post-Independence, it became the language of imperialism. The same language, however, came back in the globalised era as the language of outsourcing,' Nilekani explained.

Technology and democracy also underwent similar notional changes. From being mere ideas, they went on to become powerful tools of transition and empowerment.

In the book, Nilekani presents his set of 18 ideas that are divided into three broad groups - basic ideas, the ideas of anticipation and contested ideas.

'The six basic ideas have given us six to eight percent growth per annum, the ideas of anticipation - those which we have agreed upon but have not implemented - will help sustain the growth, and the contested ideas or new strategies will take the growth story to the next level,' Nilekani said.

The book deals at length with primary and higher education - as one of the four ideas that have yet to take off.

'Primary education in India is linked to economic reforms that Union Finance Minister P. Chidambaram is trying to set in motion. Most people are now aware of the economic cost of education.

'At least 50 percent of the poor children in the slums are going to private schools and people are shelling out substantial amount of money for private education,' Nilekani said, adding that the government must improve its education delivery mechanism.

According to him, 90 percent of the country's population will become literate by 2020.

'They will be exposed to the media and develop aspirations. If you don't ride the wave of aspirations, you have may have problems in the future,' he warned.

Reforms, said Nilekani, were ultimately about access.

'Reforms have to fundamentally provide millions of people access to jobs, markets and education. Having half done reforms is almost like having no reforms at all. The challenge for India is to take the reforms to the next level without creating few rich guys,' he said.

Nilekani prefers to describe his set of ideas as a 18-pronged safety net. 'And people will have to buy the safety net to change the divisions of differences into unity of ideas.'

'I want them to understand the complexities of India rather than see it in silos. People must have a holistic outlook of the country based on its history, evolution, the present and the future,' said the technocrat-author, who interviewed 126 experts from across the world to cull out his ideas for India's future.

'Reading the book will definitely change the way people think,' he prophesied.

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