

feed her sweets, he would feed her the best of everything that Bombay had to offer. He forced himself to shout these claims to the huge and uncaring city; and the city looked back at him and laughed at his ambition. (p.346)

The narrator's voice is set free when it is not beholden to the mythical-realist characters. The strength of the book lies in its clever reimagining of mythology rather than in its descriptive voice. But that should not deter any reader from pressing on — this is an enjoyable and satisfying book.

Ganesh is invoked at the beginning of the novel — "...Lord Ganesh, look favourably upon this endeavour" — and he speaks at the end — "I had indeed removed many obstacles". This is a vital framing, which shifts focus from the human invocation of the god to his own doubting voice; he is a trifle surprised that he had "indeed" been able to untangle the threads of Leela's life. These theoretical and theological transmutations are the novel's strength — asking its readers to consider their own fraught relationship with divinity and desire. Gods and humans are locked in an inescapable tussle; each relies on the other to stay alive.

The end of the novel finds Leela peacefully ensconced in the grounds of a fort, writing. Ganesh asks her:

'What have you been writing?' She turned back, and a frown appeared on her brow as she contemplated the figure of her creator. 'I am writing a book for Bharati,' she said at last. 'The Mahabharata?' I cried, scarcely able to suppress my delight. 'That text with a million voices?' (p.422)

The incredulity of anyone attempting to write a text with a "million voices" is what maintains the epic's sacred quality. One can hardly believe a mortal capable of such a task. Yet, the novel, in bringing kin and kind together, imputes human motives to the gods, asking instead if what we surmise as divine is not simply the oft-repeating narrative of human existence.

Meera's poem, "The Last Dictation," is at the heart of the novel's mystery. It ends with these two lines: "A sisterhood of blood and ink / Proof of our collaboration". A similar sympathy lies between the author, her characters, and the women from the *Mahabharata*. Unwilling to serve simply as a palimpsest of men's history, Albinia's female characters ask for authority over their own lives, their own stories. In a narrative tradition dominated by patriarchy, the pen is finally wrested from Vyasa, even from Ganesh, to find form and inspiration with Leela. The mythological or the realist form cannot in isolation serve the complexity of the nation that is India. To write a book for Bharat then, to be heard amongst a billion voices clamouring for expression, and to strip bare the intricacies of myth, reality, sexuality, literature, and religion in the nation's temporal and imaginative structure is not for the faint-hearted. *Leela's Book* attempts the undertaking with gusto. ■

In the early 1990s, Pico Iyer went and lived at the giant Los Angeles International Airport for two weeks, exploring it as he would have explored, say, Kathmandu or Kinshasa. The end result of that was *The Global Soul*, his book describing a frenetic new interconnected world of "airports that looked like transnational cities... cities that looked like transnational airports"—"global non-places", as he called them, populated by a new breed of "full-time citizens of nowhere".

It may have been an important territory to address, Iyer later confessed, but it was one of his least favourite books: he didn't like to re-read it because it left him, even years later, feeling jangled and seasick. Well, John Kasarda has bad news for Iyer: that global airport-city/airport he described — an "aerotropolis", as Kasarda terms it — could be the defining model of 21st century urban planning. This new urban form, combining in itself a mega airport, business hub, shipping facility and planned city, is perhaps ideally structured to meet the demands of today's hyper-competitive world of global business, jet transport, 24-hour work-days and digital communication.

Kasarda is a management guru from the University of North Carolina, and he's the leading proponent of the concept of the aerotropolis, advising governments and corporations around the world on how to make it a reality. Greg Lindsay, his co-author, is a journalist who has written for magazines like *Time* and *BusinessWeek*. Together they've produced a book that is either disturbing or exciting, depending on who you are and how you look at the world: Are you Pico Iyer? Or are you a member of today's great materialistic army of multinational executives, economic planners or global consumers with a taste for iPads from China and coffee from Guatemala?

Historically, as Kasarda reminds us, cities have grown at the junctions of transport routes: roads (Delhi), water-ways (Singapore) or, more recently, railway networks (Chicago). In the 20th century these historical cities then added on airports, as a matter of necessity, but always at their periphery, keeping themselves at a safe distance from the noise, hazards and pollution of early air traffic.

Now all that needs to change, says Kasarda. In today's highly globalised, consumerised, want-it-all-now world, where speed equals survival, the paradigm is shifting. In order to compete in this new world, the city of the future — indeed the city of today — must be located on strategic aviation routes. But that's not all. To meet the insatiable, ever-faster demands of the global markets, the city must be literally turned inside out for optimal efficiency: designed with the airport smack in its centre, instead of at the periphery, says Kasarda, and with concentric rings of industrial, business and human activity fitted logically around it — factories, ware-houses, offices, homes, schools, etc — in such a way as to cut out all logistic waste, maximise

# The 550 mph city

**Aerotropolis – The Way We'll Live Next**

By John Kasarda and Greg Lindsay

Allen Lane/Penguin Books India, New Delhi, 2011, 468 pp.,

Rs 599 (PB)

ISBN 978-1-846-14100-3

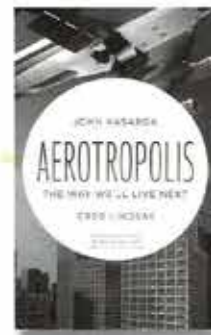
ANVAR ALIKHAN

its productivity and slash its time-to-market. (The ideal, of course, would be an urban model with production lines that would lead almost into the bellies of the air-freighters themselves — a prospect that might not actually be too far away.)

As Kasarda points out, "Despite all the talk of the service economy, of healthcare and software as our national industries, the western world's is still a goods economy. A large and growing proportion of these goods move internationally, as a consequence of trade and modern supply chains. All of this passes through a 'physical internet', the

globalisation made concrete. It is custom-made for today's world-is-flat economy, no longer dominated by any nation, where anyone can therefore succeed, provided they compete fiercely — and intelligently — enough. The aerotropolis is thus both a brand-new urban model and a global economic engine.

A classic case study that Kasarda likes to cite is New Songdo in South Korea. Initially conceived in 1997 as a magnet for attracting foreign investment — in response to the harsh conditions that came with the IMF's bail-out after the Asian Financial crisis — New Songdo is a



**Aviation is now re-defining our idea of the city, and how it should look, feel and function. This development, significantly, coincides with the emergence of the city as a global force. If the 19th century was the era of empires and the 20th century the era of nations, it is said the 21st century is going to be the era of cities. It's true:**

**today about 100 cities account for nearly one-third of the planet's GDP**

network of hubs and planes for trading and transporting goods — and people — almost as quickly as the internet itself. And it's arguably more important — the web can't move your box from Amazon."

A quick look at the numbers reiterates the logic. Over the past 30 years the world's GDP has grown 154 per cent, the value of world trade has grown 355 per cent, but the value of air cargo has grown by a whopping 1,395 per cent. Today, 40 per cent of the total economic value of all goods produced in the world — but comprising less than 1 per cent of the total weight — is shipped by air. Raw materials and bulk goods may be sent by container ship, but virtually all the products that symbolise our new globalised lifestyle — whether Nike shoes from Vietnam, blue-fin tuna from Japan, Louis Vuitton bags from France or pharmaceuticals from India — are sent out on Boeing 747s and Airbus A300s: a mind-boggling \$3 trillion worth of such products per year, and rising.

And the ideal mechanism to make all this possible is, of course, the aerotropolis—which is, ultimately, nothing but the concept of

\$35 billion aerotropolis built on a man-made island in the Yellow Sea, just across the water from Incheon International Airport. It is now a Korean base for fighting trade-wars: its strategic advantage being that it's located just a 4-hour flight away from approximately one-third of the world's population.

Built by an American consortium, New Songdo also claims to be the world's greenest, and smartest, city. It is, in fact, a mini-Manhattan, complete with its own Central Park, malls based on those of Beverley Hills, a Jack Nicklaus designed golf course and South Korea's tallest business tower. Its consortium of developers includes high-tech majors like Cisco, thus indicating its advanced level of 'wired-ness'. But the city's most significant feature is the special 12-mile long ocean-bridge — the world's longest — that connects its buzzing production and logistics facilities directly to Incheon's gigantic international airport, one of the world's busiest air-cargo hubs. And from there its products are shipped out, at 550 mph, to millions of eager consumers waiting within its strategic 4-hour radius.

New Songdo will be completed by 2015 but, interestingly, its developers claim that in the process of building the city, they've "cracked the code" of this new urban form, and are already talking to the mayors of 20 cities across China about building New Songdo clones for them. Aerotropolis like these will therefore soon transform the way the world does business (not to mention the way it lives its life). Thus aviation is now re-defining our idea of the city, and how it should look, feel and function. As Kasarda explains, cities "are now effectively a part of global production systems, and without that connectivity, you're out of the game".

This development, significantly, coincides with the emergence of the city as a global force. If the 19th century was the era of empires and the 20th century the era of nations, it is said the 21st century is going to be the era of cities. It's true: today just about 100 cities account for nearly one-third of the planet's GDP. And when New Songdo does business with Sydney or Sao Paulo, you can be sure that South Korea's official relationship with Australia or Brazil will be only of peripheral relevance to the deals.

What seems to concern Kasarda (and many Western businessmen and economists), however, is that while the concept of the aerotropolis is being eagerly embraced in Asian countries – which are therefore poised to reap its

**Today, 40 per cent of the total economic value of all goods produced in the world – but comprising less than 1 per cent of the total weight – is shipped by air. Raw materials and bulk goods may be sent by container ship, but virtually all the products that symbolise our new globalised lifestyle – whether Nike shoes from Vietnam, blue-fin tuna from Japan, Louis Vuitton bags from France or pharmaceuticals from India – are sent out on Boeing 747s and Airbus A300s: a mind-boggling \$3 trillion worth of such products per year, and rising. And the ideal mechanism to make all this possible is, of course, the aerotropolis – which is, ultimately, nothing but the concept of globalisation made concrete**

enormous economic benefits – it is being viewed with marked disfavour in the Western world, where angry activists, entrenched commercial interests and sclerotic politicians combine to block any moves towards making it happen in cities like New York or London, lumbered as they are with obsolete airport models, at least 20 years behind the times. Kasarda points out that the closest thing to an aerotropolis that the USA has today is Memphis International Airport, where FedEx has set up its global hub. Twentyfive years ago this region was a Deep South economic disaster area; today thanks to the airport (or

thanks to FedEx, to be more precise) it has an annual output of over \$20 billion and nearly 200,000 jobs – one of every four in the region – either in FedEx's own operations or within the ecosystem that has grown around it, of warehouses, transport operations, factories and corporate offices. Meanwhile, Little Rock, Arkansas, where FedEx actually started out, but whose airport couldn't keep up with its needs, thus forcing it to shift to Memphis, still remains a stagnant economic backwater.

In sharp contrast to what's happening – or not happening – in the West, Kasarda points to developments

in places like the Middle East and China. Today the Dubai government is busy completing its \$33 billion aerotropolis, Dubai World Central, which will be the size of London's and Chicago's airports combined, with three times the cargo capacity of FedEx's Memphis hub, plus a resident population of 750,000, thus making it approximately the size of Stockholm. Its neighbouring cities of Doha and Abu Dhabi, meanwhile, are working on audacious plans of their own to set up aerotropolis of a scale that will be able to compete with Dubai's. And China, typically, is quietly setting up a hundred – a hundred! – aerotropolis across the country, as well as in other places where it has strategic interests, from oil-rich Angola and copper-rich Zambia to Pakistan's deep-water port of Gwadar. All this is a reality that we in India need to wake up to ... and very, very urgently.

*Aerotropolis* is a thought-provoking and important book of our times. Kasarda and Lindsay present a persuasive case for us to re-think urban planning around the concept of great airport-centric hubs—or else risk falling behind permanently in the global economic race. But the big issue, obviously, is what quality of life can humankind look forward to in a world made up of shiny, soul-less economic Disneylands such as these? If Pico Iyer were to read this book, sitting in his home in the ancient, cherry-blossomed streets of Kyoto, he might well consider committing seppuku. ■

**Award winning titles from**

HarperCollins Publishers India

Join our **Readers' Club** at [www.harpercollins.co.in](http://www.harpercollins.co.in)