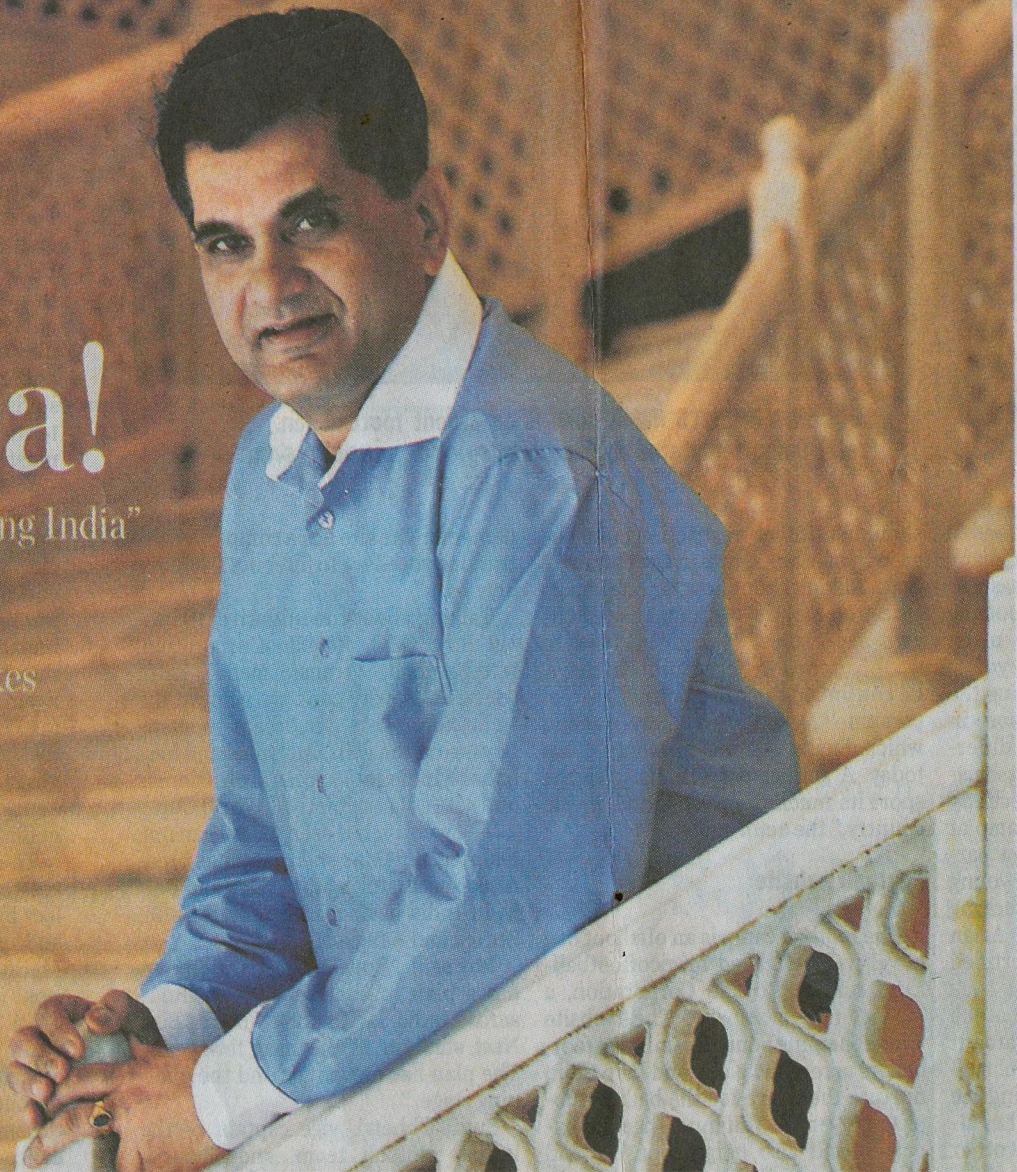


What an idea!

BOOKMARK As "Branding India" hits the stands, author Amitabh Kant tells ANUJ KUMAR what it takes



STEP TO SUCCESS Amitabh Kant in New Delhi PHOTO: S. SUBRAMANIAM

In bureaucracy it is perilous to have a face. But Amitabh Kant managed to walk the tight rope. Mention Indian tourism and Kant's name will be remembered for being the face of the team that turned the tide first for Kerala with the God's Own Country promotion and then replicating it at the national level with Atithi Devo Bhava and Incredible India campaigns. "Incidentally, I got an opportunity to be associated with one sector for more than a decade. First as Secretary, Tourism Kerala and then as Joint Secretary in the Ministry of Tourism," says Kant settling for an interview before the launch of his book "Branding India", where he has relived his experiences.

Kant says the world is moving towards experiential travel. "Sea, sun, sand theory no longer works. People want to see the place as it is. They want a differentiated product. The grass root experiences like the British foreign minister had with Rahul Gandhi in a UP village is one example. Endogenous or rural tourism is going to be hit." He says it works for India because we need not dilute our cultural ethos to attract the foreigners. "It worked in the case of Kerala because we promoted backwaters and ayurveda fol-

lowed by Kathakali, Mohiniattam and Kalaripayattu. Now Bihar could be promoted as a major Buddhist centre. Orissa and Madhya Pradesh are already working on it." He points out the turning around of spots like Ajanta, Ellora, Hampi and Humayun Tomb because of timely investment to improve the quality of infrastructure.

Crises as catalyst

In tourism, Kant insists, crises should be turned into opportunities. "Kerala came to the scene when Kashmir became terror-prone. In fact, Incredible India was launched when the tourism sector was in doldrums after 9/11. Now the downturn that has happened after 26/11 could be used as a launch pad. We should use the time to create many more budget hotels. In future the tourist inflow is not going to come from the US or Britain. It is the Chinese and Koreans who are expected to throng India. These people spend a lot on shopping but tend to save on accommodation. However, they are very particular about clean sheet and clean seat! To cater to their needs we need many more three-star hotels." The booming real estate

prices don't allow the feasibility of such enterprises in the National Capital Region. "The Government should give the land on lease for 35 to 40 years to overcome this problem," advises Kant.

Incredible India is also a good example of public-private partnership. "Government should act as a facilitator and should help in the branding of a place. Then the private sector should take over." He maintains the lowest cost theory followed in different government sectors could not work for tourism because it requires creativity to hook a person to your country and creativity doesn't come cheap. That is the reason that Kant roped in Santosh Sivan for God's Own Country campaign and Bharatbala and designer V.Sushil for Incredible India.

An antidote

The point is it is the public money that goes into the venture? "Indeed it is, but we should also keep an eye on the returns. The tourism industry creates 250 million jobs world over whereas the software industry creates only 20 million jobs. As India taps its massive potential, tourism will

become a major growth catalyst." To top it Kant calls it an antidote to terrorism. "Quoting Atal Bihari Vajpayee, he says terrorism breeds intolerance, while tourism breeds tolerance and empathy." This he says should reflect on the ground. "After successful branding, we realised the efforts should show on the ground. That is why we launched the Atithi Devo Bhava campaign where taxi drivers and guides were educated on cleanliness of the sites and good behaviour. Shah Rukh and Aamir Khan were roped in to drive home the point to general public." Kant agrees we still get to hear reports of bad behaviour with tourists, but points out we have come a long way.

Currently posted as Principal Secretary and Special Commissioner (Industries), Kerala, Kant says he does miss tourism sector. "But I am still associated with augmenting the infrastructure." Is it the price for being in the limelight for too long as his critics have a long list of grouses? "Such projects require a human face. Unfortunately, I was the one. But one thing is certain such big projects can't be successful if you are not passionate, committed and work with integrity," Kant signs off.