

Indira Gandhi as a Prototype of Duryodhana in The Mahabharata: A Close Peep into Shashi Tharoor's The Great Indian Novel

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Abstract

Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* is modelled on the ancient epic the Mahabharata in terms of structures, issues and characters. The novel tells the political history of the 20th century India through a fictional recasting of events, episodes and characters from the Mahabharata. According to Tharoor, the political history of the twentieth century India closely resembles, and can be properly understood only in relation to the events and the characters of the Mahabharata. The national movement for freedom from the British colonial rule and the people's uprising against Indira Gandhi's dictatorial regime marked the continuation of the epic struggle between dharma and adharma fought on the battleground of Kurukshetra. The present paper tries to analyze the character of Indira Gandhi comparing with the character of the great warrior Duryodhana in the Mahabharata.

Keywords: Post-colonial, Agenda, Nationalization of Banks, Pseudo-egalitarianism, Committed Judiciary, Autocracy

The history in *The Great Indian Novel* begins with the emergence of Mahatma Gandhi as the leader of Indian freedom struggle from the British rule and ends with the return of Indira Gandhi to the power after the downfall of the Janata Front government in 1977. It covers a period of nearly 75 years and all the major political events in pre- and post-independence India. It is the alternative version of history modelled on the background of the Mahabharata which critically reassesses the role of all the leaders during the span. After critically analyzing the novel, it becomes clear Shashi Tharoor has presented Indira Gandhi in an unfavourable light. In the novel, she is ironically portrayed as Priya Duryodhani- in the role of female Duryodhan. Indira Gandhi had a lonely and unhappy childhood. Her father was often away with his work during India's Freedom Struggle. Her mother was frequently bedridden with illness, and later suffered an early death from tuberculosis. Her school and college education were also hectic due to those circumstances. The birth of Indira Gandhi is depicted using animal imagery thus:

It was a baby's cry and yet it was more than that; it was a rare, sharp, high-pitched cry like that of a donkey in heat,

and as it echoed around the house a sound started up outside as if in response, a weird, animal moan, and then the sounds grew, as donkeys brayed in the distance, mares neighed in their pens, jackals howled in the forests, and through the cacophony we heard the beating of wings at the windows, the caw-caw-cawing of a cackle of crows, and penetrating through the shadows, the piercing shriek of the hooded vultures circling above the palace of Hastinapur. (TGIN, 73)

Suddhendu Shekhar, in his essay, *Shashi Tharoor: Adjuncts of History*, writes about *The Great Indian Novel* thus:

Chaos is the conspicuous theme of *The Great Indian Novel*. The political history of modern India, bearing resemblance to the events and the characters of a bygone period underlines the evolution of chaos as a result of the foibles and follies of the political personalities with responsibility. They fail to live up their expectations and equate that responsibility community-wise, instead indulge in self-aggrandizement. (Shekhar, Suddhendu, 97)

P. Lal comments on *The Great Indian Novel* thus:

The Great Indian Novel is an attempt to retell the political history of the twentieth century India through a fictional recasting of events, episodes and characters from the Mahabharata.... The Mahabharata has come to stand for so much in the popular consciousness of Indians: the personages in it have become household words, standing for public virtues and vices and the issues it raises, as well as the values it seeks to promote, are central to an understanding of what makes India. (Lal, P., 9-12)

After Nehru's death, it became clear that he had left no legacy for the democratic system of the country. During his tenure as Prime Minister, Nehru had not allowed any leader to grow. In the absence of a better alternative, Lal Bahadur Shastri was made the Prime Minister. Though nobody was sure about the strength of Shastri, he proved himself to be a good Prime Minister in a 'decent and well-meaning' way. When Pakistan made the second attempt to capture Kashmir (1965), he taught the deceitful neighbours a lesson by inflicting on them a stunning

defeat. Unlike Nehru, Shastri preferred peace to winning war and the preservation of life to taking revenge. He meticulously gave away every inch of the Pakistan territory which the Indian soldiers had won. But he died while signing the peace treaty at a conference table in Tashkent. The Kaurava Working Committee (Congress) selected Priya Duryodhani as India's next Prime Minister because of her uncommon stature, deceptive docility and mistaken maneuverability. As Ved Vyas, the participant narrator, says ironically,

We want a Prime Minister with certain limitations, a Prime Minister who is no more than any minister, a Prime Minister who will decorate the office, rally the support of the people at large and let us run the country. (TGIN, 318)

After a year of Duryodhani's 'undistinguished and diffident' rule (TGIN, 339), the country went to polls in the fourth general election after independence in 1967. The Kaurava (Congress) Party retained the power at the centre but it lost seats all over India to a 'motley array of opposition groups' (TGIN, 339) which cobbled together coalition governments in at least half-a-dozen states. The electoral setback widened the split in the Kaurava Party. In a post-election meeting after the Kaurava Working Committee convened to take stock of the situation, Morarji Desai (Yudhishtir) began to oppose Duryodhani's interest in fads and openly raised his voice opposing her official policy. He expressed serious doubts about the efficacy of Duryodhani's leadership to run the country thus:

If we had stronger leadership, this would not have happened. (TGIN, 339)

The bitter conflict between Indira Gandhi and Morarji Desai over the responsibility of the electoral defeat and putting the Party in order was resolved with the Kaurava High Command arriving at a compromise that there would be no change of leader and Morarji Desai would be the Deputy Prime Minister. But the formula did not work long. Duryodhani could not digest the humiliation of having her authority curtailed in this manner. She was not certain about her future political career and turned her diffidence into assertiveness. She became increasingly cold and distant in her behaviour with senior leaders of the Party and began to ignore the Deputy Prime Minister. She stopped sending him any file, refused to respond to his suggestions, and called cabinet meetings without bothering to intimate him. Feeling insulted, Morarji Desai resigned from the cabinet on 16 July, 1969. At this time of political struggle, the democracy of the country was deteriorating day by day.

Resignation of Morarji Desai gave Duryodhani an

opportunity to promote her own cause within the Party and the Government. She began to speak loudly of her father's socialist ideals which had been betrayed by 'the reactionary elements' within the Party. She appealed to all left, liberal and progressive forces outside the Congress organization to rally behind her effort to fulfill her father's socialist dream. Along with Chandrashekhar (Dronacharya's son, Ashwathaman who has inherited his socialist father's political mantle), Indira Gandhi set up to push her populist agenda like the abolition of privy purses and the nationalization of banks ignoring the country's economy. On the issue of privy purses, she could get the support of the majority of the Congress Working Committee. But she failed to carry a majority of the party with her on the question of bank nationalization. Tharoor describes the issue of bank nationalization:

Today we all realize what some of us realized even then, that nationalization only means transferring functioning and successful institutions from the hands of competent capitalists to those of bumbling bureaucrats. (TGIN, 346)

Determined to foster her socialist credentials, Duryodhani called for a free vote in the Parliament and was able to pass the bill with the support of the leftist opposition parties. The legislative victory evinced Duryodhani's immense political clout at the cost of democratic process. But before the controversial bill was made into an Act with the Presidential signature, the decent and dignified figurehead of the nation, Dr. Zakir Hussain (Dr. Mehrban Imandar), passed away on 03 May, 1969. The presidential election gave the beleaguered and scattered Congress old leaders an opportunity to regroup and teach Duryodhani, who had gone out of their control like 'Frankenstein's monster', a lesson. With a view to reigning in the recalcitrant Prime Minister and imposing a no-nonsense President on her, they chose Neelam Sanjeeva Reddy (Ved Vyas) as candidate of party. But Duryodhani challenged the party's decision by proposing the name of V.V. Giri (Eklavya) as an independent candidate. The election of the president in the country's postcolonial history resulted in a narrow victory for Duryodhani's candidate. The election led to the split of 'the world's oldest anti-colonial political organization, sixteen years away from its centenary' (TGIN, 351). The majority went with Indira Gandhi and called themselves Kaurava (R) means Congress (R) and the rest called themselves Kaurava (O) means Congress (O). For the first time since Independence, the Prime Minister did not enjoy the support of majority in the parliament. But her government survived with the support of left parties who were deceived by her pseudo-galitarianism and insincere socialist rhetoric.

After a year, during which the self-serving Prime Minister

attacked 'big business' and 'monopoly capital' to win the public support, Duryodhani called a snap poll in 1971. With a slogan of 'Remove Poverty', she returned to power with a bigger parliamentary majority than even her illustrious father had ever enjoyed. Duryodhani, thus, emerged victorious and 'stood alone amongst the ruins of her old party, having smashed to pieces all the pillars and foundations that had supported her in the past' (TGIN, 351). Instead of self-respecting leaders, she was surrounded by shameless sycophants.

The glorious moment in Indira Gandhi's political career was the Bangladesh War (Gelabidesh War). The Great Indian Novel analyses the political as well as cultural and linguistic reasons behind the revolt of the East Pakistan against the West and its declaration of independence. India intervened in the civil war because ...

the repression of the Gelabians (Bangladeshi) following the imposition of martial law sent a panic-stricken flood of brutalized humanity flooding across our borders to create, on Indian soil, the biggest refugee problem the world has ever known. (TGIN, 354).

Indian army liberated Bangladesh from Pakistani repression. The strength of military power of India during this war is portrayed thus:

Jarasandha fought bravely, but he was no match for the immense Bhim, who twice tore him apart in the middle and flung him in two to the ground, only to find the pieces fusing together again and Jarasandha returning refreshed to the fray. At last Krishna, the political advisor, caught the dismayed Bhim's eye, picked up a straw, broke in half and cast the two pieces in opposite directions. Bhim, catching on immediately, seized Jarasandha with a cry, wrenched him apart and flung the two bits away on either side, making it impossible for the halves to reunite. (TGIN, 356)

The decision to make entry into Bangladesh War rewarded her with administrative excellence. But the country was plagued by illiteracy, poverty and unemployment due to the heartless ineptness of Indira Gandhi in whom they had placed their trust. The ugly symptoms of autocracy manifested themselves in her attempts to blackmail the press and create a 'committed' judiciary on the pretext of their being out of touch with the masses. Those whimsical policies adopted by Indira Gandhi weakened the institutions in the country. Jayaprakash Narayan (Jayaprakash Drona) and Morarji Desai (Yudhishtir) lead an uprising to remove her from power. But she became more adamant. Her close confident

Siddhartha Shankar Ray (Shakuni Shankar Dey) advised her to hit back vehemently by declaring Emergency.

In June 1975, Indira Gandhi declared the Emergency and suspension of civil rights. The period of Emergency was one of the most satanic rules in the political history of India. She arrested all the opponents and postponed the general elections. The press suffered censorship. She launched 'the 20 points programme' for the common man. The 20 points programme remained largely unimplemented. After Indira Gandhi assumed office, democracy was in the worst and floundering state because of her failure to deliver the goods to the people. The politics of Indira Gandhi proved to be the worst as compared to the colonial British rule in India. The state of emergency declared by Indira Gandhi reminds us of the game of dice and disrobing of Draupadi in The Mahabharata. The state of emergency declared across the country is portrayed in the artistic way by using animal imagery:

And the jackals howled again, Ganapathi, the wolves bayed, the braying of donkeys rose above the clamour, the vultures screeched outside as their wings resumed their insistent beat on the window-panes, the claws of unknown creatures scratched gruesomely on the glass, but inside the court there was only the deathly unnatural silence of spectators at a public flogging as Dushasan caught hold of the pallav of Draupadi's sari and wrenched it off her shoulder. (TGIN, 381)

At the same time Tharoor finds some improvements during this period like steady prices, decline in the number of strikes, demonstrations, presence of bureaucracy.

Jayaprakash Narayan set a revolt against Indira Gandhi's autocratic rule. The dishonesty and cynicism of the corrupt government affronted the conscience of the socialist freedom fighter. He openly called for the restoration of India's ancient values to the country's governance. The uprising fired the people's imagination. And was transformed into a mass movement in which the opposition parties were also joined. Jayaprakash Narayan held her responsible for the betrayal of the people's hope and expectations.

Duryodhani (Indira Gandhi) thus paid the price for her complete identification with her party and the nation through a sycophantic and fascist slogan ('Indira is India'). (Ghosh, Tapan K., 103)

The movement led by Jayaprakash Narayan rocked the central government and made it unstable. Congress (I) ruled state governments, run by Indira Gandhi's handpicked ministers who became notorious for their ineptitude and servility, were also paralyzed. The political

tide seemed to turn away from the country's Prime Minister to the hands of her opponent. Tharoor is critical of Indira Gandhi for the worst political situation in the country prior to the declaration of Emergency. At the same time, he holds Jayaprakash Narayan and the assorted opposition for the political chaos in the country.

I was no admirer of Priya Duryodhani or what she stood for, but I was equally distraught about Drona's Popular Uprising and where it was leading the government. (TGIN, 364)

He thinks that the opposition could have waited for the next election, which was not far away, and voted Indira out of power. But instead of it, they chose a political short cut and clamoured for her removal in the street instead of in the parliament, where they had been reduced to a ridiculous minority. According to Tharoor, the opposition parties cornered Indira Gandhi and forced her to fight back. This shows the dual policy of politicians to safeguard their place in politics. This is obviously seen in today's party politics in India. Thus, the real political perspective is captured by Tharoor in *The Great Indian Novel*.

The political crisis was intensified by a verdict of the Allahabad High Court which found Indira Gandhi guilty of electoral malpractice of sharing a platform with the President, a nonpolitical figurehead, during her election campaign and deprived her of her parliamentary privileges pending appeal. Emboldened by the court verdict, the Popular Uprising demanded her resignation. But the beleaguered Prime Minister fought back by declaring an Emergency (internal siege) on the advice of Party President Siddhartha Shankar Ray. The decision to impose siege on the ground of 'a grave threat to the stability and security of the nation from internal disruption' was endorsed by the President Fakhruddin Ali Ahmad. This proved to be the most disastrous part of Indira Gandhi's political career. In the name of securing the country's stability, a state of anarchy was let loose. Midnight arrests of opposition and Trade Union leaders were followed by press censorship, suspension of fundamental rights and adopting measures to put the judiciary in their place. But these draconian measures to suppress opposition only served to unite the diverse constituents of the people's uprising in a loose and purely expedient coalition called Janata Morcha or People's Front. In *The Great Indian Novel*, the two years long despotic regime of Indira Gandhi appears to be only a part of the deteriorating political culture of India since independence. Tharoor is doubtlessly critical of Indira Gandhi's decision of the Siege. He terms it as 'cynical' and 'self-serving'. But at the

same time, he blames people like Jayaprakash Narayan who compelled her to take this extreme step. In Tharoor's view:

The Emergency was not uniformly evil. The implementation of a twenty-point socio-economic programme for the common people and the banning of political demonstrations and strikes gave the nation a sense of purpose and direction which replaced the earlier drift and uncertainty. (Ghosh, Tapan K., 105)

In 1977, Indira Gandhi surprised the world by withdrawing the Siege and announcing a general election. Numerous theories were advanced by political analysts to explain her sudden decision. This election gave the Indian voters opportunity to choose between democracy and dictatorship. The People's Front was joined by the leaders who were deserted by Indira Gandhi. The main supporter of Indira Gandhi, Chandrashekhar, who had been ill-treated and imprisoned during the Siege, also joined the People's Front. The election showed the wrath against Indira Gandhi's dictatorship and the People's Front came to power. The constituents of the coalition government designated Morarji Desai as Prime Minister. But the magic of the Front's victory and the hopes raised by the new government did not last long. Morarji Desai failed to keep his coalition together and embarrassed the nation by openly advertising his personal fad. In the election that followed, Indira Gandhi returned to power riding a wave of disenchantment with the Janata Front misrule.

The greed of hierarchical throne on the part of Duryodhana in *The Mahabharata* is paralleled with the political hierarchy of Indira Gandhi in the novel. There is a close resemblance in the profile of Duryodhana in *The Mahabharata* to Indira Gandhi, the most prominent figure in India's political history. Duryodhana in the *Mahabharata* used his greater skill in wielding the mace to defeat opponents. He was also an extremely courageous warrior and was said to be a good ruler. Duryodhana's greed and arrogance were the two qualities said to lead to his downfall in the *Mahabharata*. He never left whatever goal he chose once because when he believed he had right to the throne, all the worldly perils couldn't shake him off that thought and his downfall as well. All those qualities were also present in the character of Indira Gandhi during her political regime. The parallelism, serves to depict her as one who in her determination, obsession with power, willfulness and ruthlessly autocratic style of functioning matches the hundred Kauravas of the epic, led by Duryodhana. Her two close aides R.K. Dhawan and Siddharth Shankar Ray are given the identity of

Dushasana and Shakuni. The parallelism holds good as Shakuni and Dushasana of the epic were mainly responsible for tempting Duryodhana to get intoxicated with power. On the whole, The Great Indian Novel provides a detailed analysis of party politics in the Indian Democracy. It revealed the political hypocrisy on the part of the political leaders to achieve their ends. Tharoor's treatment in dealing with the politics of pre- and post-Independence India is realistic and not biased. He openly criticized the policies adopted by the leaders where they should be criticized.

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