

## Exploration of Multicultural Perspective in Shashi Tharoor's India: From Midnight to the Millennium and Beyond

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### Abstract

*In Indian Writing in English, Shashi Tharoor appears to be a leading luminary. In the critical perspective he is rightly considered to be Indian though he born in London and educated in America. He has established himself his remarkable contribution to the development of art and techniques of innovative writing. His ideology consists of construction out of deconstruction, frequent visit to the new land to reshape it with the appreciation of the past yet unable to provide the finality. Being an U. N. Diplomat, profound journalist and a sensitive writer conveys his ideas and views through the conscious study of culture, history and politics. He exploits the culture and multiple identities as the main stuff to bring desired colours and appeals in his writings. His Indo-London and American background highlights his multicultural awareness. The present paper is an attempt to explore his multicultural perspectives through his literary work like India: From Midnight to the Millennium and Beyond'. The impact and influence of various cultural realities, ideologies, religions and political positions are major factors to explore his literary work.*

**Keywords:** Multicultural Awareness, Cultural realities, Ideologies, Religions and Political positions

Multiculturalism is one of the major traits of Shashi Tharoor's writings. In Indian society, there is multi-caste, multi-religion, multi-ethnic, multi-linguistic community and multi-tradition. It covers within its range several heterogeneous factors which make it a unique society in the world. Plurality is the main aspect of Indian society which creates fragmentation, decentring and micro-politics of marginalized communities and groups. Its core is to establish and understand how people from different culture communicate with each other. "The culture of society comprises of shared values, understanding, assumption and goals learnt from earlier generation, inculcated by old generation and passed on to the succeeding generation"<sup>1</sup>(Shapkarsaha, Amit:2010). Multiculturalism is sometimes constructed as ideologies which advocate values such as those associated with transculturation, transnationalism, cosmopolitanism, interculturalism and globalism. "Nevertheless, Multiculturalism is fundamentally a neutral term, which

favorably portrays the other cultures"<sup>2</sup>. In practice, it is usually applied only to situations involving significant cultural divergence. The historical process of multiculturalism brings with it many complicated conceptual problems, causing a rich debate over it.

India: From Midnight to the Millennium and Beyond' (1997) published on the occasion of 50th anniversary of Indian independence. It brings out the major issues of the triumphs and failures of Indian democracy, leadership, socialism and secularism. He demonstrates the balance between culture, history and politics. Historical figures and historical incidents and role of politics played in interpretation of culture are highlighted.

Tharoor projects India as 50 years old. It has been one of the greatest expressions of human civilization. In India ,there are 22 official languages and 22,000 dialects spoken and slot in some of the most fierce sectarian fighting-Hindus against Muslims, Sikhs against both-going on anywhere in this world .The 50th anniversary of India was marked by celebrations. The 'tryst with destiny' that Nehru reminded on August 15, 1947 at midnight hours. To a great extent this was an occasion to celebrate but to some extent it was not better to think of it, for it reminded the partition. The intellectuals looked at this event as culminating point to think the success and failures. He reviews the past 50 years and also think of the forthcoming challenges before the country. For him, India, after its completion of fifty years stands as an intersection of the four most important debates that the world is facing at the end of 21st century. They are bread vs. freedom debate, the centralization vs. federalism, the pluralism vs. fundamentalism and the globalization vs. self reliance debate.

Tharoor explores experiences and elucidates every aspect of India. The plurality in every feature of this country poses a difficulty in the assigned task. At the outset, he points out that India is a country with an extraordinary mixture of ethnic groups, with diversity in religious and cultural practices, using many languages, residing on a land with a rich bio-diversity of topography and climate. This multiplicity is also manifest in the topography of

this country. At the Eastern end we find the quicksand of Sunder bans and on the Western is the Sahara. On the North end the Himalayas where as the Southern narrows in the ocean. With all these diversifying aspects, it is impossible to make generalizations. Even the Indian national motto emblazoned on its government crest 'Satyameva Jayate' which means "Truth always triumphs" sounds ambiguous to Tharoor. It is this pluralism that makes India unique. The physical realities too, are responsible for this diversity. Tharoor writes:-

...With diversity emerging from its geography and inscribed in its history, India was made for pluralism. It is not surprising, then, that the political life of modern India has been rather like traditional Indian music: the broad basic rules are firmly set, but within them one is free to improvise, unshackled by a written score ( p.13).

Tharoor, moves on to the changing scenario in the country in relation to ' caste'. This is one more factor that brought out of its grave, used to mobilize the electoral factor in politics. He narrates a story of Charlis, whom he met at the age of eight or nine in his village; a rural area. He belonged to untouchables could not play or eat with him. As a child, the writer could not understand this type of behaviour with the untouchables still he gets friendly with him. After nearly 20-25 years, he and his uncle visits the Collector's office regarding some dispute about his land. To his surprise he finds his childhood friend Charlis in the Collector's chair. It is a surprising change, to which the narrator wants to refer. This democratic change which India had been promoting since independence has worked better; in Kerala. It happens all over India, though its success varies in the different states.

Now the 'caste inequality' has been replaced by education and economic equalities. But this happens to be only in the urban cities for we do see the same cruel oppressions atrocities still going on in the rural parts of India. We still read news of a Dalit woman stripped naked and paraded, molested, raped on the streets, untouchables gunned down, and their houses burnt down. This clearly indicates their resisting attitude towards a change whereas these lower castes are now demanding a social equality along with the political equality which they were provided by the vote. Politics definitely has changed the 'importance of caste'. In the aura of caste the political leaders visualize their vote banks. The Scheduled Castes along with Scheduled Tribes were granted a safe and secure place in every sector of administration. To them now OBC are added. The Mandal Commission in 1990 which was severely opposed by the upper caste recommended a hike in the percentage of reserved places. These

recommendations now are state policy and gone in success to such extent that after controlling state they have also controlled the Central Government.

Here in this affirmative action only a minority of Dalits was benefited, for they were in a position to take it. But anyhow the factor 'caste' came again' into limelight. Now candidates were preferred with an eye on the vote bank. So it is said that one who was followed by masses belonging to his caste was considered as a leader. Every leader got attached to his own caste. The upper caste regime was now replaced, in some parts, by the coalition front of the underprivileged. The trend forced the upper caste dominated parties the Congress and the BJP to promote low caste members to leadership position. All this was done now by keeping an eye on the vote banks essential for electoral victory. Tharoor ends this chapter by quoting Andre Beteille who too accepts that the problems of the backward classes are too varied large and cannot be solved by reservation only. Yet word of praise is all there when one visualizes untouchables and tribal acquiring the seats of Vice-Chancellor, becoming Doctors, pilots, and lawyers.

Tharoor once again asserts that in India there is no majority as such. Everything is in minorities only. The scattered presence of all communities everywhere throughout the country provides the cause of becoming minority. Religion, language too, cannot become the criteria of asserting majority. If a religion guarantees a person majority, then his caste places him in the minority group. It is because of this scattered presence of all castes that we find varied results in elections and we cannot claim anything concrete. The same is the case with language. In India there are 35 languages though the constitution only recognizes 17, with their own grammar, script, but yet no one language can asserts its majority. In India, when we tell our name, actually we are revealing our native origin the language we speak and many more thing. We because of our multifaceted identities always land in minority. It is language we speak, the caste to which we belong or to the place where we reside that places us in a minority. Tharoor by giving his own example of multifaceted identity proves that-

...I'm simultaneously Keralite (my geographical state of origin) Malayali (my linguistic-cultural affiliation), Hindu (my religious faith), Nair (my caste), Calcuttan (as a result of my schooling and by marriage), Stephanians (because of my education of Delhi's St.Stephen's College), and so on and in my interactions with other Indians ,each or several of these identities may play a part. Each, while affiliating me to a group with the same label, sets me apart from others; but even within each group, few would share

the other identities. I also claim, and so I find myself again in a minority within each minority (115-6).

Shashi Tharoor has a word of admiration for the extraordinary persons who rose above the criteria of religion, caste and politics and pledged an allegiance for India. He remembers Curium Chagla, Air Chief Marshal Latif, the editor M.J.Sakbar, the Zaki family, who were proud of their three Generals in the Indian army and a senior Air-Force Officer, and a nuclear scientist Dr.A.P.J. Abdul Kalam usually transcends their identity. Tharoor has a harsh word for Mr. Syed Shahabuddin who resigned his ambassadorial post and contested the elections for Janata Party and turned himself to a narrow-minded spokesman for Muslim Sectarian interests who dared to ask for a Muslim boycott of India's Republic Day celebrations. This kind of political religious identity for these self-appointed leaders speaks as if they are spokesmen of the community.

Family laws are an important part of Indian society. The concept of Indian family includes several members together who make it a joint-family where in each member is necessarily involved in the welfare of other. While in villages this structure of family continues to exist to a considerable extent, in cities and town, this structure seems to have been disintegrated. This concept replaces the idea of 'welfare state' which constantly helps each other. This helping attitude benefits relations of those in power. This work of charity fails to improve other vital necessities. Shashi Tharoor draws our attention towards the filthy, rotting thing lying near the common walls, staircases. The flat owners in a building are aware about cleanliness to their flat's extent, but he is not ready to accept the responsibility for the areas he shares with others, in the same building. Even the public places are dirty, full of garbage. The author points out towards the dualistic Indians attitude about hygiene-

'...The Indian wades through dirt and filth, past open sewers and fly-specked waste, to an immaculate home where he proudly bathes twice a day. An acute consciousness of personal hygiene co-exists with an astonishing regard for public sanitation' (290).

Tharoor explains the concept of 'pluralism' through the ways the food is cooked and eaten. In a nostalgic sense he visits India every time to remember the steaming idlis,coconut chutney, women in saris, blue ocean, snow peaks, with all its beauty. India for him is his home.

Tharoor successfully captures the ups and downs of India from the independence. He points out towards the orgy that occurred after Dec.6th,1992, which maligned the

newly emerging its standstill position. He still expresses his faith in India's resurgence amidst this violence. For him, this violent outburst cannot destroy India. He makes us aware that it is a change in the Indian spirit, which can destroy India. Until Indians believe in pluralism and coexistence, he assures that nothing can harm India. Along with this he also makes familiar about the challenges able to transform India.

'...As the country nears the fiftieth anniversary of its independence, it is undergoing a period of ferment in which profound challenges have arisen to the secular assumptions of Indian politics, to the caste structures underpinning society, and the socialist consensus driving economic policy (324).

He with these challenges points out towards the serious problems of Kashmir, Assam and Punjab, the borderline states. The outburst of violence in these states now emerges along with the imported terrorism. India encounters with corruption, violence, sectarianism, and criminalization of politics along with social tensions. These things definitely affect the aspiring economic liberalization programs. All these things along with its own economic choices have paved way for imbalance in economic sector;

'...A combination of India's own economic choices and external factors has left the country with colossal economic challenges, with chronic fiscal deficits, an increasingly disastrous balance of payments, a deficient infrastructure, and mounting unemployment and inflation'(324-25).

This economic ferment along with social ferment has helped in a disastrous way to violence. Unemployed youths, who could not get a chance to prove themselves, have found a way of expressing their resentment through violence. Along with unemployment, they find themselves deprived of opportunities because of reservation policies for dalit and backward classes and economic reforms inviting foreign labours. The middle class struggles to survive the entire with other problems too, like water and air pollution, corrupt administrative system, environmental problems caused due to deforestation and the 'cripplingly congested and outdated education system'.

Thus, multiculturalism is a dominant theme in his writings. He tries to cultivate the importance of social bonds and bondages and often represents India as a great moral country. He has an unfathomed reverence felt for the moral superiority and cultural heritage of India. His combination of fact and fiction help to raise the quality of his writings to high level of undisputed craftsmanship.

He has given importance to culture. He argued there should be no any discrimination in politics based on caste, religion gender, colour, creed, language and nationalism. He shows the moral superiority of Indian culture.

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