

Shashi Tharoor Crusader For Religious Pluralism In India

Nasreen Ghani* & Dr. Premalatha. S**

**Research Scholar Department of Arts and Humanities - REVA University- Bengaluru*

***Assistant Professor Department of Arts and Humanities - REVA University- Bengaluru*

ABSTRACT

*My research article seeks to highlight the fact that the fictional and non-fictional works of Shashi Tharoor, his world famous speeches, outstanding interviews and peppered talks across the globe on the topic the greatness of India, her past, present and future, make him the most suitable spokesperson India could have, especially giving him further advantage on the topic owing to his vast knowledge on the subject of India since his student days, his 20 long years career at the UNO as the world peacekeeper and a rare example of an uncorrupt politician, an outstanding member of the parliament and above all a magician with words and style. Shashi Tharoor has not written much that is not on the topic of India in spite of authoring 15 bestselling books, thousands of articles, hundreds of interviews and countless speeches delivered across the width and breadth of not only India but the globe. Considering these points, the whole body of the literary contributions of Shashi Tharoor can be taken as an authentic revelation on the future of India. The very titles of Shashi Tharoor's books *The Great Indian Novel*, *India from Midnight to Millenium*, *India Shastra*, *India – the Future is Now*, *Pax Indica – India and the World of the 21st Century*, to name just a few, very clearly bring forth his idea about the importance of India to the world and at the same time serve as an eye-opener to the present young generation and the generations to come about the real truth of India which the entire world has misunderstood and misinterpreted time and again over the centuries. Shashi Tharoor is not just moon shining in his works about Super Power India, Soft Power India, Shining India and India Incredible but like an erudite historian and suave advocate he puts forth the real facts and figures and honest statistics to present his argument that India is the indisputable leader of the 21st century. However, the strong message that Shashi Tharoor wants to convey to the Indians is, if India has to be successful in its endeavor to be the global leader, the one single most important thing for India is to safeguard its age old philosophy of religious tolerance and never compromise its spirit of pluralism. If this one core issue is overlooked by the democratic rulers of India and religious fanaticism and bigotry is allowed to mushroom, that would sound the death knell of India's progress and shame her before the eyes of the world. So, Shashi Tharoor's message is that whatever may happen Indians must never allow any dividing factors to create rifts between them. We must not only forget and forgive our petty differences but also unify as one stupendous nation vaulting towards the long before predestined glory of a bright future.*

KEYWORDS: *Incredible India – super power – soft power – global leadership - religious extremism – spirit of pluralism*

Acceptance rather than tolerance is the Indian secret. And I think that has been the strength of India's soft power. That's why we're stronger in 21st century world". – Shashi Tharoor

Internationally, India has the prospect of designing a parallel universal power balance yet internally it is shackled by disorder and petty conflicts. It is this single theme that runs through most of the works, speeches and interviews of Shashi Tharoor - the greatness of India's past, the promise of a bright future yet a cataclysmic present. The suspense of the situation is that the destiny of this volatile nation can turn either way at anytime for the good or the bad. The question is will India emerge as the utopia the world is looking forward for it to be or will it end up in the nightmare of dystopia of another massacre and massive annihilation. This question is at the very basis of the lifetime literary mission of Shashi Tharoor.

Embracing rather than accommodating, exchanging rather than comparing, assimilating rather than coexisting are the ways of the Indian psyche – the collective psyche of a one and a quarter billion people. The singularity of India is that it has always stood for peace and could be described as the very embodiment of peace in a war mongering war stricken world – an oasis in the desert of unending conflicts.

India is a land where history, myth, and legend of so many different religious sects and philosophical themes overlap so much so that sometimes Indians themselves cannot tell the difference. Since centuries, many saints from India across all religions have always advocated peaceful coexistence as the only key to many problems of the country.

However, since the turn of last century there has been a nationwide wave of fanaticism and bigotry, open and fearless expressions of religious intolerance and hidden forces fully active creating deep rifts between hitherto peaceful communities. One after the other, there or here, these or those incidents creeping up like catastrophic mushrooms further widening the old gaping wounds in the minds of two major religious groups of India both burdened with centuries of bitter memories and baying for the blood of each other.

The tragedy is further aggravated by governmental lethargy verging on indifference leading to insidious support and encouragement to religious factions creating an atmosphere of uncertainty and fear psychosis. The danger is so real and tangible yet officially brushed off as insignificant exaggerations. Added to this is the mounting tension at the borders shared with a hostile country that is absurdly provocative and unreasonably uncouth and hitching for a nuclear confrontation. Further exacerbating the situation is the fact that external mercenary groups working secretly underground to undermine the very integrity of the great nation. Add to this the uneducated and unqualified milieu of politicians and a hysteric media - that completes the picture of the ugly side of the modern India.

However, the actual image abroad of India and Indians is totally a different one in the present world. From the international perspective, India is a utopia of endless possibilities, the most promising land of future potentials and a unique nation that has the control to change the power balance of the planet. This enviable position was not achieved by the cast of a dice between time and fate but through centuries of character refinement through culture and civilization, the search for truth and philosophy of life and building a legacy of tolerance and amity.

It is at this crucial juncture when India's image in the world arena, as a contender for global leadership of peace loving countries, shaping up that the destructive powers are more vigorous than ever before. The precious icon of India's image is being undermined and being projected as an unstable playground and a veritable volcano which can destroy itself at

anytime, solely owing to the fact that India is marred by deep religious conflicts that have now come to the foreground and the marauding crowds are prowling the streets now more emboldened than ever making the future of India seem gloomy and hopeless.

“The magic of Indian nationalism is that it is not based on a particular language, a particular geography, a particular religion or even a particular ethnicity. Indian nationalism is an idea emerging from ancient civilization, united by a shared history and sustained by our pluralist democracy”, argues Shashi Tharoor. From his first book to the latest, fiction or non-fiction, articles, speeches, interviews and talks across the most important media platforms of the world, Shashi Tharoor has time and again emphasized this critical matter of far-reaching impact - the soft power of India on its rightful path to becoming super power but dark violent forces at work to tarnish the spirit of India and throttle its progress.

"This country with all these qualities inherited from millennia of living as an example of this sort of culture has the soft power that would truly make it the influential leader in the 21st century," Tharoor said , but he also said "Because our civilizational ethos has been the immeasurable asset for our country and it is bipolar. We do not allow specter of religious intolerance and political opportunism to undermine our soft power in the 21st century." He put in the simplest words possible when he said: There were aspects of Indian society and culture that the world found more attractive than just government initiative. Today those aspects may not directly persuade them about India, but they go a long way to enhance India's standing in the world."

Whilst he is a staunch nationalist, incurable indophile, most informed and well-experienced expatriate and the best spokesperson India could have, Shashi Tharoor has expressed his sincere evaluation of India from a global perspective and he is of the conviction that India has the singular advantage of being a model country, mainly owing to its love for pluralism and refusal to straightjacket itself as an exclusive belonging of a particular group of people – whatever majority they could be and irrespective of whatever happened in the past to justify their claim.

“I believe in an India of pluralism and diversity, not of religious bigotry and caste politics. I believe in an India that is secure in itself and confident of its place in the world, an India that is a proud example of tolerance, freedom and hope for the downtrodden.”

Openly speaking about the change of political atmosphere that is now more conducive to the evil destructive forces that would rather lay India shattered to pieces than tolerate the great nation with a population of one-fifth of the world stride the world stage, Shashi Tharoor says, “Our democracy, in the last 70 years, has been built on the idea that a nation may celebrate differences of caste, creed, conviction, color, culture, cuisine, costume and custom — and still rally around a democratic consensus”. That pluralist consensus is on the simple principle that in a democracy you don’t really need to agree — except on the ground rules of how you will disagree. One of those basic ground rules is respect for difference, not just respect but, as Swami Vivekananda so memorably put it, acceptance of difference. This rule ensures that our diversity is a source of India’s strength, not a weakness. And the responsibility of the government is to uphold that idea of difference and to firmly, clearly reject any attempt to dilute it. He also makes his political standpoint clear when he says, “It is time for the government to take its own slogans seriously and put India first. India’s great strength, and the source of much of its soft power and the respect in which it is held in the world, is our

precious legacy of civilizational pluralism, coupled with our robust democracy. The Indian adventure is that of human beings of different ethnicities and religions, languages and beliefs, working together under the same roof, dreaming the same dreams.

Shashi Tharoor is deeply disturbed by the fact day by day the evil forces are becoming stronger by joining hands to suck up the life source, strangle the very breath and suffocate the supple spirit of India. Shashi Tharoor warns: We cannot simultaneously sell ourselves to the world as a land of pluralism, tolerance and Gandhianism, while promoting intolerance, communal hatred and minority insecurity within the country". He also states with an air of finality that "The fact that we are a land of such rich diversities and one that does not impose narrow conformities...The whole thing about being Indian is that you can be many things and be one thing, it is an important lesson in a world in which we are all trying to grapple how to manage diversity."

In conclusion, we can say that the vision of Shashi Tharoor for India is that India should quickly sort out its internal conflicts and move towards the bright future that is predestined exclusively for India. He advocates the simple democratic policy of one for all and all for one without the dividing walls of religion, ethnicity and language for India. The core feeling of oneness with the one great nation and the remarkable sense of being and belonging to a billion group mass of thousands of diversity yet all in a unison harmony is in itself a unique unifying feeling, the one feeling that all Indians share in common and that feeling is the one of the heritages we have to save for the future generations India.

Shashi Tharoor's short and crisp message to India is that if this soft power of India is channeled in a suitable manner, it would culminate in creating a unique nation that could lay its claim to lead the world into a realm of peaceful coexistence; if not, India would lose its image of an ideal country that the rest of the world could emulate and would turn into a dangerous geographical mass that could shatter world peace forever. The choice lies in the hands of the common people of India and the single singular weapon they possess – that of voting to power the truly democratic forces within the country and at the same time standup against any forces that seek to divide India and Indians on any grounds any further.

WORKS CITED: SPEECHES OF SHASHI THAROOR

- i. Indian culture has soft power to make an influential leader : Shashi Tharoor
- ii. (updated : June 9 2017)
- iii. Indian Nationalism Pluralistic, not Domain of any religion : Shashi Tharoor
- iv. (updated : April 15 2016)
- v. Shashi Tharoor Quotes – (Hope, Freedom, Politics)
- vi. Intolerance debate : The full speech that Shashi Tharoor was to deliver but could not.....
- vii. (updated : *December 3 2015*)