

**Shashi Tharoor's *India: From Midnight to the Millennium*:
A Historical Survey of Pre and Post-Independent India*****Dr Ajay Kumar Sharma******Dr Jitendra Kumar****ABSTRACT**

Shashi Tharoor, in his non-fictional work, *India: From Midnight to the Millennium*, discusses India's politics and the system of politics that govern Indian democracy; this work depicts a history of postcolonial, post-independent and postmodern India. He throws light on the culture of politics in post-independent India. Tharoor discusses the landmark decisions and happenings during these fifty years. He makes a commendable and personalized examination of the contemporary India juxtaposing the pre-independent India with the post-independent India. He evaluates the past fifty years and also the challenges that India will face in the near future; for this, he thinks about the forces that have formed modern India and also on those forces that are going to shape the image of India's future. Tharoor gives a comprehensive survey of the Prime Ministers of India in this book; he tracks down the inheritance of Nehru/Gandhi dynasty, being in the driving seat of the Congress Party. After discussing the problems of caste, religion, communal politics, and corruption, Tharoor draws our attention towards NRI: Non-Resident Indian, who have got name, fame and wealth in the foreign lands; they are financially very strong now and can help their motherland to overcome the financial crisis. Tharoor discusses the economic policy of India and the important role played by the Indian bureaucracy in the implantation of the developmental policies. Shashi Tharoor finishes his historical survey of India carried out on the eve of fifteenth anniversary by replying to the queries he has raised initially in the book. He strongly believes that in the coming century, India, amidst all the global odds and ends, will withstand democracy with all its openness, tolerance and freedom.

Key Words: Survey, History, Politics, Development, Democracy, Independence

**Shashi Tharoor's *India: From Midnight to the Millennium*:
A Historical Survey of Pre and Post-Independent India*****Dr Ajay Kumar Sharma******Dr Jitendra Kumar**

To begin with Mohit K. Ray's observation: ". . . *India: From Midnight to the Millennium* presents a critical analysis of both India's past and future on the 50th anniversary of its independence. While writing, Tharoor felt that a book was needed which explored what Independence really meant for India" (525). The long awaited independence of the country presented both uniqueness and diversity of India; the independence, which was achieved by nonviolence, ended up in the blood bath and partition of the country. Tharoor makes it clear that the British rule brought the political unity in India, but on the contrary, when they left, they caused political disunity; the pros and cons of the British rule are presented before us. Tharoor thinks that the most significant aspect of the first year of independence is the absence of Mahatma Gandhi; he was killed in the capital by a Hindu fanatic, Nathuram Godse, just after the five months of independence. Godse killed him, for he thought Gandhi was more inclined towards the Muslims and was responsible for the transfer of a large share to Pakistan. Gandhi expressed his longing to spend his remaining life in Pakistan after the partition; this provoked Godse to kill him. Tharoor calls Gandhi: "idealistic, quirky, quixotic, and determined, a man who answered to the beat of no other drummer, but got everyone else to march to his tune" (*India: From Midnight* 16).

Mahatma Gandhi, a great leader, was famous for his austerity and the straightforwardness with which he drew the attention of masses for his efforts to get freedom for the country; he introduced the two great weapons of 'ahimsa' and 'satyagraha', which the alien rule could not counter. Tharoor makes it clear that Gandhi's ways were successful in Africa and also in India; nonviolence, Gandhi's greatest weapon, uprooted the British rule from India forever. But in the present perspective, the problems of terrorism failed Gandhism not only in India but in the whole world; the 'truth' and 'nonviolence' were very dear to Gandhiji but now these words have lost their meaning in this dark world. In spite of adverse conditions, Tharoor recognizes Gandhi's greatness, because India has still to overcome those central challenges which Gandhi had identified. These problems are: ". . . overcoming disunity and discrimination, ensuring the health and well-being of the downtrodden, of developing the capacity to meet the nation's basic needs, of promoting among Indians the integrity and commitment he labelled "Truth" (Tharoor 22). Tharoor asserts that these unresolved challenges will decide the agenda of the next fifty years.

Tharoor gives a comprehensive survey of the Prime Ministers of India in this non-fictional work; he tracks down the inheritance of Nehru/Gandhi dynasty, being in the driving seat of the Congress Party. In the very beginning, Tharoor comments upon this continuing

appeal of Nehru/Gandhi dynasty; under the influence of this appeal, the Congress Party men unanimously voted Sonia Gandhi, Italian wife of the late Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, being the sole adult survivor of the Nehru/Gandhi family, the Party President and endeavoured to make her the Prime Minister of India. The Congressmen have always realized the need of Nehru/Gandhi family to run the Party; without any member of this family they experience as unaided orphans. If we trace the legacy, it starts with Motilal Nehru, a renowned Kashmiri lawyer from Allahabad, who was one of the leading members of the Indian National Congress working under the towering leadership of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. Motilal Nehru led his Cambridge educated son Jawaharlal Nehru in politics. Jawaharlal Nehru became the youngest member of working committee of Indian National Congress; he never looked back and became the President of Indian National Congress in the year 1928. He also headed the interim government as Mahatma Gandhi's nominee in 1947; after that it was Nehru's India. Nehru carefully nurtured democracy and secularism for 17 years; the policies in India reflect his vision and principles. Nehru was deeply shocked by the China war and died subsequently, leaving no successor. Madhu Limaye observes about Nehru's policy: "His unrealistic and baseless glorification of the two-thousand-year-old friendly India-China relations (which were never political or state level relations) was responsible for the lack of vigilance in our borderlands" (76). After his death, the leaders of the Congress Party preferred Lal Bahadur Shastri as the candidate for the chair of the Prime Minister; during his short tenure of two years as the Prime Minister of India, he faced a war with politically unstable Pakistan that was under the military dictatorship. Shastri went to the Soviet city of Tashkent to sign a peace agreement with Pakistan; he agreed to return most of what his brave soldiers conquered on the battle field defeating the enemy. After knowing the uselessness of war, and the waste of life and resources on the battlefield, he died of a heart attack with a broken heart in the city of Tashkent; after Shastri's death, once again, the Congress Party was in dilemma. Leaders of the party were in search of an eligible candidate for the post of Prime minister of India; the search ended on Indira. Thus, Indira took the reins of the country in her hands; Indira, Nehru's daughter, was also his official hostess and political aide.

Indira became the president of the Congress Party in 1959; her chief political advantage was her family background. Tharoor asserts: "One member of the Syndicate that made her prime minister thought she would be a *goongi gudiya*, a 'dumb doll', the presentable face of boss rule. For a year this indeed seemed to be the case, as Indira, inarticulate and tentative, overtly reliant on advisers of dubious competence, stumbled badly in office" (31). In the elections of 1967, the party paid the price by losing seats around the country; the end of the dynasty seemed in the offing but Indira fought back. Defeat of many syndicate members in the election helped her to trim down their influence in the party; after reducing their influence, Indira caused a split in the Congress Party in 1969: ". . . Having established a populist image and expelled the old bosses, she led her wing of the Congress to a resounding victory in 1971, campaigning on the slogan *Garibi Hatao*: 'Remove Poverty'" (31-32). After that India defeated Pakistan in the Bangladesh war; now Indira was gaining

much popularity. But the hurdles began to affect the success story; although she gave the famous slogan “*Garibi Hatao*”, yet she had no master plan to remove poverty; it remained only a campaign slogan, for there was complete absence of right vision or program to turn the slogan into reality. Amidst all these tribulations, a high court judge in Allahabad held Prime Minister responsible of the malpractice in her overwhelming victory in the 1971 general elections; being convicted by the court verdict, it appeared that Mrs. Gandhi would resign in humiliation but instead of resigning she declared a state of emergency. All the opponents were arrested, press was censored and sixth general elections were postponed; this period of emergency took Indira away from the masses; though, then Congress Party president raised the slogan “Indira is India and India is Indira” (33). Mrs. Gandhi said in an interview: “The reason for emergency and postponement of elections was instability and indiscipline in the country” (Pouchpadass 166). Mrs. Gandhi dared to declare elections in March 1977; thinking that her decision of imposing emergency will be corroborated by her victory in the elections. But luck had something else in store for her; Congress Party was routed and she herself lost her seat. The Janata (people’s) front government came into power with Morarji Desai as the Prime Minister of India, but this coalition government could not run the country for a long time. In January 1980, after splitting the Congress once more, Mrs. Indira Gandhi was back to fight the elections with a Congress Party named after her (as Congress-Indira or “Congress-I”). Khilnani observes: “Indira Gandhi has caused more splits in the Indian National Congress during the last seventeen years than the splits caused in the premier political party, from 1885 to 1969. After every split, Mrs. Indira Gandhi has emerged stronger and brighter” (22). This time she emerged victorious and became the Prime Minister of India again. But along with this electoral victory, came a heartbreaking blow, her son and political protégé, Sanjay Gandhi, was killed in a plane crash, doing stunts in the sky over Delhi; after his death, Mrs. Gandhi could not find anyone who could fill the void created by Sanjay’s untimely death. Now she turned towards: “. . .the only person she could entirely trust—her self-effacing, non-political, and deeply reluctant elder son Rajiv (1944-1991)—to fill the breach” (Tharoor 37).

Rajiv had scarcely started to learn his role when Mrs. Gandhi was assassinated by her own two Sikh security guards on 31 Oct. 1984 and brought an end to the tumultuous era of Indira Gandhi; her untimely tragic death turned the emotional Indian masses in the favour of her dynasty. Rajiv Gandhi got the sympathy of Indians and gained a great parliamentary majority than any other Indian Prime Minister had ever received. Now a wave of change started in India in the field of education, economic developments, cultural affinities and technology. People thought that he will solve the perennial problems of India; he talked about liberalization and elimination of corruption. People saw him as a reformer and a technocratic politician, but all hell broke loose when he faced the charges of corruption in the Bofors gun deal with a Swedish arms manufacturer. Subsequently, the Congress Party suffered a big loss in the general elections in 1989, bringing the anti-Congress coalition to power. But this coalition government too didn’t last long paving the way for a revival of the dynasty. Rajiv

Gandhi travelled widely throughout the country to win the support of the people, but unluckily he was assassinated by a Sri Lankan Tamil suicide bomber. Tharoor observes: “. . . in the election of 1991, the most important verdict was delivered not in a ballot box, but in a coffin” (47). It really seemed an end of the dynasty.

In this book, Shashi Tharoor is very much concerned about his views on India, Hinduism and his Keralite origin. He is disturbed with the Ramjanmbhumi agitation, leading to the demolition of Babri Masjid and consequent communal riots sully the secular image of India. When India got independence it was a secular country, a country not devoid of religion, but a country with different religions, for secularism was essential to the nationalism. The communalization of Indian political system provoked the people; consequently, destroying the secularism of India. The unity between the two communities of the Hindus and the Muslims was shattered forever. The contribution made by the Muslims before and after the independence was forgotten; subsequently, the whole community faced the wrath. What perturbs Tharoor is why the whole community is forced to face the fury when only a handful of them are behaving in an unbecoming way. How can we fail to remember what the Muslim community had done and is doing for the country? Tharoor praises the ‘Hinduism’ as a religion which has many holy books; originally the word ‘Hindu’ basically implied for the people who lived beyond the river Sindhu or Indus. The author grew up in a Hindu family; he describes himself as a believer of Hinduism because of the generous attitude of this religion. He says that Hinduism has always taught to respect all other religions; it is a religion full of diversity, candidness and religious freedom. Tharoor is very much disturbed to think that how such a good religion can give birth to fundamentalism. Tharoor attributes his secularism through his Kerala roots. Describing Kerala Tharoor observes: “More important, Kerala is a microcosm of every religion known to the country; its population is divided into almost equal fourths of Christians, Muslims, caste Hindus, and Scheduled castes (the former Untouchables), each of whom is economically and politically powerful” (69).

Tharoor further turns to the shifting scenario in the country in relation to caste; this is one more important factor influencing the electoral politics in India. The ancient caste system in India is considered as a divider of society, but, even then, it has persisted in our society. As India has the most ‘hetero-hued population’, the *varna*, meant colour, was replaced by occupation for the determination of caste. The rigidity of canons of caste system did not allow inter-caste marriages and even did not allow the upper castes to take food from the lower castes. The untouchables were not allowed to take water from the wells reserved for upper castes. The Brahmins had to take a bath even if the shadow of an untouchable fell on them. The untouchables were not allowed to worship in the temples; moreover, only upper-caste men could twirl their moustaches upward. Budha, Mahavira, and Guru Nanak ardently resisted this caste system in their movements of social reforms. The Brahmo Samaj of Raja Rammohan Roy, Mahatma Gandhi, and Dr. Ambedkar, revolted against the ancient caste system in India. But gradually with the development, the caste discriminations are now

disappearing; in Indian cities, the ancient caste system is losing ground very fast. The writer points out that presently educational and economic inequality have taken the place of caste inequality. But such kind of change is noticed only in urban areas, for we can notice the same atrocities, discriminations and oppressions in the rural parts of India. In the present time, vote bank politics has increased the importance of caste; different political parties make big promises to woo the lower castes' vote bank. After independence, it was decided to compensate for the injustice done to the lower castes in India.

Discussing the perceptions of 'majority' and 'minority', Tharoor makes it clear: "So we are, as I have already observed, all minorities in India" (113). In the whole country, all the communities are scattered everywhere providing them the status of minority; we cannot make the criteria of religion or language to assert the status of majority. If by religion a person thinks himself a part of majority, then his caste places him in the minority; if we take the case of language we find same results.

If we take ethnicity, it too cannot be a parameter in deciding majority; in our country, when we tell our name, our place of origin, our language, and many other things which reveal us are often exposed. So, it would be a wrong assumption to consider oneself as a member of the majority group in India; even if, we fix on to think generally 'Hindus' in majority, we find it impossible to vow faithfulness about some particular beliefs. We witness various ways of worshipping, different names of gods and deities, and different rituals and customs. Here Tharoor quotes Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh's V. D. Savarkar who described a Hindu as "a person who regards this land. . .from the Indus to the seas as his fatherland as well as his Holy land." Subsequently, Tharoor raises a question against this definition: "What about those whose faiths originated outside India, and for whom India cannot therefore be their 'holy' land?" (117)

Tharoor points out that some states in our country have adopted the policy of appeasement of the minorities to get their vote banks. Thus, secularism in India took a different form; because of the appeasement of the minorities, the identity of the Hindus is being suppressed and they feel betrayed. They have concluded this for Indian policy of bestowing privileges and policy of appeasement to the Muslim community; the appeasement of a particular caste or religion has, instead of uniting, divided India. Now people in India are becoming more conscious about their castes and religious identity; our great freedom fighters had never expected this. Describing the unique nature of Indian nationalism, Tharoor says that it is not based on language, geography, ethnicity, or religion. He makes it clear: "Indian nationalism is the nationalism of an idea, the idea of an ever-ever land. This land imposes no procrustean exactions on its citizens: you can be many things and one thing. You can be a good Muslim, a good Keralite, and a good Indian all at once" (127). Tharoor, providing the solutions of these problems, says that it can be solved with Hinduism, a Hinduism that the promoters of Hindutva have not comprehended. Hinduism with all its munificent openness, non-doctrinal free attitude can be an ideal remedy for the solution of the problems of India. The Hinduism told by Tharoor is different from the existing one; such kind of Hinduism as

Tharoor accepts will never allow demolishing the mosque. The ancient Hinduism can be briefed in the credo '*Sarva Dharma Sambhava*' which means that all religions are equally worthy of respect. It is right time to admit that Hinduism and Islam are entwined in India; no religion can claim its supremacy on this land.

After discussing the problems of caste, religion, and communal politics, Tharoor draws our attention towards (NRI: Non-Resident Indian, but for Tharoor) some sources of great importance that can be very helpful in the development of the country; he introduces NRIs, who not residing in India and yet too important for India. NRIs have got name, fame and wealth in the foreign lands; they are financially very strong now and can help their motherland to overcome the financial crisis.

Tharoor discusses the economic policy of India in this part of the book; the economic policy was not a matter of concern for common man; it was a matter to be discussed by some economists, a few businessmen, share market holders, who were going to get benefit from it. Tharoor finds the root causes of economic crisis to the year 1954, when Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and the Congress Party decided to work towards a 'socialist pattern of society'. It was considered a good defensive policy so as to keep away the foreign intruders under the disguise of business. Nehru's principal economic adviser P. C. Mahalanobis came up with the second five year plan to attain industrial self-sufficiency to be attained by a state controlled public sector. This public sector would be financed by higher income group, professionals and sales tax on its citizens. India was going to industrialize with Indian money through the hands of the government of India. The public sectors were considered as 'new temples of modern India'; these units employed a large number of Indians and kept the country free from profit-oriented capitalists; in this way, performance was never considered as criteria and turmoil was overlooked; the inefficiency was remunerated with incentives and subsidies. In 1992-93, out of the 237 public sector units, 104 were in loss of about 40 billion rupees. Because of Nehru's dislike for capitalism, Indian government could not make an advantageous relationship with capitalists; Nehru liked the achievements of the socialist Soviet State and focussed the country's economic policy so as to develop India into a 'socialist pattern'. Along with regulations and socialist-inspired restrictions on business, taxes were imposed on them; a large part of the tax amount was spent on government's overspending rather than making use of it on welfare schemes. When this money was not enough to pace up with appetite of the government, it borrowed money piling up higher and higher deficits. In a way government was trying to control more and more of economy.

After making assessment of the era of Nehru and Indira, who tried to earn socialist credential, Tharoor now turns his focus towards Janata government, which replaced Indira Gandhi. This period witnessed the departures of multinational companies like IBM, Coca-Cola, sending negative signals across the world for business entrepreneurs. All this caused a slow rate of growth of 3.5% after independence as compared to other countries with 8 to 15% growth rate. Some economists considered the unnecessary protection of public sector, liberal

subsidies and tax exemption on agriculture income responsible for damaging the economic policy of India.

Rajiv Gandhi, the young and technocrat Prime Minister of India introduced new economic policy in 1985, but he also could do nothing new. Then Prime Minister P. V. Narshimha Rao brought a radical change by appointing a non-political figure, renowned economist Manmohan Singh as his Finance Minister. As a result, Indian government took a good decision of permitting foreign investment in 34 major areas rejecting the old phobia regarding external capital.

Now Tharoor transfers his focus to the Indian democracy and the working of Indian politics in democratic system. In a span of 50 years after India's independence the democracy was withheld during the period of 1976-77 under the name of 'emergency'. The Prime Minister Indira Gandhi declared a state of national emergency on June 26, 1975. Defending her action Mrs. Gandhi declared that the democracy was temporarily suspended and it was necessary because it was weakening the power of the national government to act decisively within the country. Such condition was disturbing the production and the prospects of economic development; though, she was trying her best to justify the emergency but the Western world was taking it as an end of a great experiment, the development of India within a pluralist's democratic framework. Mrs. Gandhi suspended the civil liberties, banned a free and critical press, arrested the opposition leaders and postponed elections, during the period of emergency. O. P. Mathur rightly observes: ". . . But for the time being the Emergency was widely welcomed even in a part of the foreign press. The atmosphere of the country seemed for a while to be pervaded by a sense of discipline and the artist M. F. Husain celebrated it by projecting Indira in a painting as Goddess Durga riding a tiger"(10).

Tharoor in his book makes an assessment of Indian bureaucracy, which plays an important role in the implantation of the developmental policies; the infrastructure which India received from British administrative government was of a tendency to rule rather than serve the demands of the public. To correct the bureaucracy from a ruling attitude to a serving attitude was a very difficult task; when bureaucracy reacted positively to popular political currents it was condemned for becoming more 'politicized' placing politicians above the dictates of policy or regulations and becoming more corrupt and inconsistent. Because of the political interference in filling up the posts the efficacy of bureaucracy was deeply affected.

Mrs. Gandhi, akin to her father, thought herself as an embodiment of popular will; in this passion, she took her decision on her own, without discussing with her cabinet, party or senior leaders. Cabinet was reduced just to a rubber stamp, approving her decisions; during the emergency period Mrs. Gandhi governed through advisors, who were accountable only to her. This also made the situation favourable for Sanjay Gandhi who was disreputable for the sterilization program and also for the demolition of slums for the beautification of Delhi. According to Tharoor it was an excellent example of susceptibility to autocracy in Indian politics. Sanjay Gandhi's five-point program comprised of population control, slum

clearance, plantation, literacy and dowry abolition, to achieve this he used all the unconstitutional power. After Sanjay's death, Mrs. Gandhi chose Rajiv to assist her.

Exposing the political roots of corruption in India Tharoor quotes various examples; politics has become a route to amassing wealth. "But the electability, particularly from the northern states, of figures referred to openly in the press as 'Mafia dons,' 'dacoit leaders' and 'anti-social elements' is a poor reflection" (Tharoor 269). This has taken the middle class and the intellectuals away from politics in India; now only the poor class can be seen waiting in lines to cast their vote. Tharoor observes that the absence of educated class from the polls is an indication of their loss of faith in the prevalent political system.

The book further traces the author's impressions on today's India, society and culture; he wishes to express India as it appears to the middle class; his impressions depict the aspirations of the middle class. Tharoor makes it clear that Indian society is continually falling between two distinct attitudes; people in India are either found preferring the path of spiritualism or completely leaning towards a worldly outlook.

Tharoor holds the Indian politics and politicians accountable for the poor performance of India in the field of education. Education for women would have changed the entire social scenario in our country; it would have helped the society by controlling the population of India. In spite of all this, Tharoor says that middle class women in India have excelled in professions which were traditionally considered reserved for men in other societies: "There have been Indian women doctors, engineers, lawyers, editors, chief executives, airline pilots, and, most famously, a woman prime minister, well before such positions opened up to their female counterparts in the Western world" (297). But he says that still the reality is otherwise; a majority of women in India are passing their lives as housewives.

Tharoor expresses his views about the change in the quotidian functioning of democracy in India. A coalition government of various regional parties has now put back the days of autonomous Prime Ministership. To a large extent, Indian politics in India experienced 'de-centering Delhi' as the coalition government of regional parties gave the national capital in the hands of those whose roots are in the regional soil. This also created some problems; the author points out the attitude of the states, which began to consider themselves as identities ruling the nation.

In his long survey, Tharoor explores everything that ought to change. He asserts: "But all institutions must change and adapt if they are to survive in a turbulent world, and India's democratic institutions are no exception to this rule" (350). He also points out the changed outlook of our politicians who enter Parliament to get post and money by causing defections, horse-trading and the floor crossing. The present Parliamentary system in India has conveyed a disgusting picture.

Tharoor advises that Indians must change from within to meet their ambitions and lift themselves to the essential criterions. He says that India's future depends on our capability to educate our children; it is also essential to use the potential of women. In a truly liberal and

secular attitude India should provide opportunities to the underprivileged sections and avoid the age-old abuse of human rights. Tharoor makes it clear that the fate of the country is in the hands of its people.

Shashi Tharoor in *India: From Midnight to the Millennium* finishes this survey of India carried out on the eve of fifteenth anniversary by replying to the queries he has raised in the initially in the book. He strongly believes that in the coming century, India, amidst all the global odds and ends, will withstand democracy with all its openness, tolerance and freedom.

WORKS CITED

- Khilnani, Niranjana M. "Emergence of Indira Gandhi on the National Scene." *Iron Lady of Indian Politics: Indira Gandhi in the Balanced Perspective*. New Delhi: H. K. Publishers and Distributors, 1989.
- Limaye, Madhu. *Problems of India's Foreign Policy 1964-1977*. Edited with an Introduction by Dr. N. C. Mehrotra. Delhi: Atma Ram & Sons, 1984.
- Mathur, O. P. *Indira Gandhi & the Emergency as Viewed in the Indian Novel*. New Delhi: Sarup & Sons, 2004.
- Pouchpadass, Emmanuel. "The Emergency and After." *My Truth: Indira Gandhi*. New Delhi: Vision Books, 1981.
- Ray, Mohit K. *The Atlantic Companion to Literature in English*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers & Distributors (P) LTD, 2007.
- Tharoor, Shashi. *India: From Midnight to the Millennium and Beyond*. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2007; first published under the title of *India: From Midnight to the Millennium* in Viking by Penguin Books India in 1997.

Contributors:

***Dr Ajay Kumar Sharma, Associate Prof & Head, Department of English, Dean, Faculty of Arts, M.S. College, Saharanpur.**

****Dr Jitendra Kumar, Asst. Teacher, R.G.N.P. Inter College, Raja Ka Tajpur, Bijnor.**