

Democracy and Secularism in Shashi Tharoor's *Riot*

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Abstract

Democracy and secularism characterise the nature of the Republic of India. These terms adorn the Preamble to the Constitution of India. The present endeavour aims to analyse Shashi Tharoor's *Riot* in the light of these constitutional watchwords. It makes an effort to identify the author's voice among the characters of the novel and clarify his views on diversity, fraternity, and unity. It also brings forth the characters who symbolise these constitutional values. It underlines the author's faith in the country's democratic rule and secular co-existence, which downplays the forces that seek to rip the country apart. Interestingly, he underscores how India has remained united despite repeated communal onslaughts and multifaceted differences. The essence of this article lies in delineating the victory of democracy and secularism over secessionism and communalism.

Keywords: Democracy, Secularism, Unity, Diversity, Communalism.

We, in India, have a dominant notion that democracy got established after India gained independence in 1947. But democracy has been in existence in India since ancient times. It was in practice in the forms of *Sabha*, *Samiti*, and *Panchayat*. Each of them endeavoured to achieve one objective and it was to have commoners play an important role in governance. Post independence, the 73rd and 74th amendments to the Constitution of India gave *Panchayats* the Constitutional backing. It aimed at bringing government and governance closer to people. It strengthened the idea that people should be able to rule the way other selective leadership rule them.

Democracy, thus, does not remain confined to direct election, it permeates a nation's vein deeply and its impact is multifaceted. In *Riot*, Tharoor represents the same. He has argued how democracy has helped in keeping the secular fabric of India intact. Lakshman, the DM of Zalilgarh is not just a collector but he symbolises the government in Zalilgarh at the local level. He ensures that democracy remain alive by downplaying the forces that seek to weaken it. During one of his parleys with Priscilla he pictures the image of India which she never had an opportunity to witness during her brief stay in India as an adolescent. He informs and instructs her. He enlightens her that there are mainly five sources which divide

India—“language, religion, cast, class, and religion”. But he clarifies how in spite of such divisions India has remained united as a nation:

The main reason for that is the other thing I said the communist were wrong about. It was that they also underestimated the resilience of Indian democracy which gave everyone, however underprivileged or disaffected a chance to pursue his or her hopes and ambitions within the common system... (44)

The novelist has emphasised how regional secessionism, protest for tribal rights, and agitation for linguistic states were dealt with deep insight and political shrewdness. These issues were solved by “creative federalism” which in today’s parlance can be viewed as one of the mechanisms to fulfil the goal of cooperative federalism (*Niti Aayog*). Naxalism is slackened by downplaying regional imbalance and directing Naxalites towards election, empowerment, and economic development. The historical wrongs done to the untouchables have been compensated in the form of reservation in government job and educational institutions along with hosts of welfare programmes pertaining to their political, social, and economic development. The fears of the Muslims, he adds, have been set aside by allowing them conform to “their own personal law”. The government itself organises, manages, and subsidise their annual pilgrimage to Mecca. Here, Lakshman tries to make Priscilla understand the complexities of the democratic nation. The complexities which have not been easy to handle to maintain unity, peace, and brotherhood in a diverse country like India. There have been bloody riots, peaceful protests, and violent agitation over these issues, he appends:

But the basic principle is simple indeed. Let everyone feel they are as much Indian as everyone else that’s the secret. Ensure that democracy protects multiple identities of Indians, so that people feel you can be a good Muslim and a Bihari and a good Indian all at once ... (45)

Lakshman’s arguments vindicate his resolute faith in democracy which he believes will solve the problems of “disaffected Sikhs” and “frustrated Muslims”. Arguably, democracy does not only protect multiple identities but also preserves diversity. Both are interdependent. For, diversity affects and shapes policy making and democracy allows diversity to prosper and bloom. It is the diversity, the novelist opines, which shapes the psyche, character, passion, and taste of Indians. He also affirms that it has flourished since mediaeval era before the advent of the British rule. Notably, one of the approaches of historiography of assigning “guilt or praise” is evident here. Professor Sarwar also claims in the narrative that “Muslim did not partition the country— the British did, the Muslim league did, the Congress party did”. He asserts he loves this country not because of his citizenship but because he has known it, he has studied its history; he has covered the length and breadth

of the country, and has breathed its “polluted air”. He is proud of his land and describes the details of its diversity in the following excerpt:

I can eat a masala dosa at the coffee house, chew a paan afterwards and listen to Ravi Shankar playing Raag Darbari, and I celebrate the Indianness in myself with each note. I hear the Muslim Dagar brothers sing Hindu devotional songs, and then I attend a qawalli performance by...a Hindu, Shankar Shambhu...This Is India, Mr. Diggs! (113)

Later, Ram Charan Gupta also underlines the mixture of ethnicities and castes in India. He points out its multiple languages, “varieties of geography and climate”, diverse religions, various cultural practices, and “clamour of political parties, our ranges of economic development”. The novelist seems to present the unique attributes of his unparalleled country before foreign minds—mainly to Priscilla and Randy Diggs through number of Indian mouthpiece.

If democracy unites India, it is secularism which assists democracy to flourish, function and fructify. Secularism, in Indian context, refers to giving equal importance to all religions (Laxmikanth). It also means that the State should not favour one religion at the expense of other. The Constitution of India declares the nature of the nation in its Preamble. It asserts “We the people of India, having solemnly resolved to constitute India into a sovereign socialist secular Democratic Republic” (*Constitution of India*). Hence the notions of secularism and democracy are inseparable from the identity of India as a nation. Political scientists and constitutional experts affirm that India has adopted a positive meaning of secularism rather than a negative one which connotes that the State has no role in religious matters. Lakshman beautifully exemplifies this positive spirit of secularism when he shares with Priscilla his long cherished dream of writing a novel; he describes his idea to her:

But why bother to do it conventionally? Can’t you write a novel about, say, religion without describing a single temple or mosque? Why must you burden your readers with the chants of priests, the oration of mullahs, the oppressive air of devotion? Let your readers bring themselves to the book they’re reading! (136)

He also questions the Indian secularists. Tharoor has tried to portray that how secularism can be turned into communalism if opposite forces are not downplayed. He blames the political parties to divide people in the name of “religion”, “caste”, and “region” (42). Religious identities are strengthened to mobilise voters in India. He expresses a nobler approach to deal with the contentious issue related to Lord Ram’s birth place. He opines people’s beliefs “provide a sounder basis for public policy”. He asserts that may be Hindus are right or Muslims wrong regarding their claims on the place. The opposite may also be possible. But he believes the Hindus of today do not necessarily need to behave the way the Muslims did in 1520s. He thinks that the Muslim of today should not pay the price for what

was done in the past to Hindus by their community. For, it will lead to violence, hatred, and irreparable damage to Hindu name. Lakshman says, “as a Hindu, I take no pride in wanting to destroy other people’s symbols” (146). He takes pride in the diversity, openness, and religious freedom of Hinduism but he also asserts that he does not have anything common with “Hindu-fundamentalists”. He quotes an ancient Hindu hymn of Vivekananda to exemplify what Hinduism actually propagates:

As the different streams having their sources in different places all mingle their water in the sea, so, O lord, the different oaths which men take...all take to thee. My own father taught me the Vedic sloka “Aano bhadrah kratvo yantu vishwatah”—“Let noble thoughts come to us from all directions of the universe”. (146)

Tharoor argues the term “Hindu” from historical perspectives. He claims that the word Hindu did not exist in any Indian language. It is the foreigner’s usage of the word that “gave India a term for self definition” (143). His claims have also been echoed by other historians who opine that the word “Hindu” simply meant in the past to refer “the people beyond the river Sindhu or Indus”(143). In the novel, Ram Charan Gupta also criticises foreign newspapers’ fabricated claims on India. He negates their fallacious publications. He questions Mr. Diggs that why do not the foreign newspapers write about India’s “richness and glory of its civilization” (229). He contends that the minorities—for example—“Jews, Parsis, Christians, and even Muslims have found refuge in this country for two thousand years and have been allowed to practice their faith without hindrance” (229) by Hindu kings. Here, Tharoor has projected that divisive technique of foreigners still finds expression in their news articles and columns.

Lakshman acts as a symbol of secularism throughout the novel. It can be observed with his treatment towards people of different caste, class, faith, religion, and descent. He is humane, sincere, and helpful towards everyone— be it Priscilla, Geetha, Gurinder Singh, Meetha Mohammad, Randy Diggs or the riot victims. He remains an epitome of secularism. His ethical qualities and moral principles get vindicated during riot control and management. He does his job sincerely and impressively. As a DM, he commands all district officers:

“Right”, I said. “You have kept the peace. Now you have an additional job. You’re in charge of ensuring civil supplies. Get the wholesale traders to open their godowns. Organise mobile vans and essential commodities for each mohalla. We have got to get food to families.” (166)

Thus, his welfare initiative is not bound by baseless communal questions. He also does it for the sake of Priscilla “who worked so hard for the Muslim women”. Later, he is enraged when he finds biased approach of judiciary towards Hindu assailants. He lashes out:

“I have never tried to interfere with the judicial process. But here— the same riot, the same offences, the same section of the Penal Code—how can there be two such openly different standards for people of two communities? It is not an ordinary case,” he added. “It is a question of the faith of a whole community in the system of justice in our country.” (178)

Hence, Lakshman represents the secular fabric of our country he is a link which brings democracy closer to people by ensuring efficient governance. He strengthens secularism by ensuring peace, unity, and solidarity amidst trouble, discord, and antagonism.

Thus, Tharoor exemplifies the ideas of democracy and secularism in multiple ways. His idea behind selection of characters rests on the foundation of secularism, for he brings to life Lakshman, Meetha Mohommad, Gurinder Singh, and Priscilla who help other characters in the novel transcending religious and linguistic differences. A soothing sensitivity of humanity permeates these characters who explicitly or implicitly propagate fraternity which, in turn, aids in strengthening the country’s democratic character. Shashi Tharoor examines the strength of Indian democracy in *Riot* and seems to establish its dauntless sustenance.

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