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Why I Am A Hindu

Shashi Tharoor

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Deeply rooted in every Indian mind is the ironic, layered perception of two universes, one of its glorious historio-mythic ancestry and the other of the present day, seemingly fallen identity. Shashi Tharoor's *Why I Am A Hindu* (Aleph, 2018) explores why India is perhaps the only country to experience a significant thread of continuity running through the two universes - first the ideal, structured, orderly world of the past - one with freedom, equality, wholeness and plurality and the second of present day world - full of utterly dismembered politics, a fallen world of values and culture. One of the key perspectives of this book is the concern centered on Hindu thought that has come down to us through myth, orality and history and its crucial contemporary idea of polity. In *Why I Am A Hindu*, Tharoor takes us through this journey of the spiritual evolution of human civilization with India at its fulcrum – in other words the truly ethical template of India as opposed to its contemporary avatar.

Life as well as art is a continuous journey of the self. The evolutionary view of human nature is on one hand romantic and on the other, existential. What comprise the universe are the dimensions of myth and the reality it encompasses. The imaginative cosmos presupposes the capacity of the mind to experience infinitude and consists of both the worlds of experience and reality. When one reads Tharoor's *Why I Am a Hindu*, it is intriguing to find or identify the social framework or template that gave us good governance or near utopia for five millennia (certainly there were no communists back then to claim

credit, which incidentally is a failed system around the world). The western template of democracy coupled with a capitalist free market system is not an adequate and self-sufficient system. It has inherent flaws and the disastrous results are for all of us to see with rampant poverty, unemployment and violence all around. One is struck by the fact that during the times of the Indus Valley civilization, there were more than 500 cities that thrived and prospered in complete harmony and there was no evidence of any weapons, violence, police, armies, forts or large income disparities. They seem to have enjoyed uninterrupted peace for almost 2000 years! So, the moot question is the framework mantra that brought about this near utopia for thousands of years and what has gone wrong now?

In the first hundred odd pages of Shashi Tharoor's *Why I Am a Hindu*, he painstakingly explains how Hinduism is a religion based on a set of evolving scriptures running into hundreds of books unlike other later religions which base their entire ideology on what is ordained in one single holy book like the Koran or the Bible. There is no one authorial holy book amongst the Hindus. The glory and wisdom of ancient Hindu thought is well capsulated by Tharoor who doesn't leave any stone unturned in singing paeans to the holy saints, rishis and scientists like Patanjali, Panini, Aryabhata and Adi Shankara. The profundity of the Hindu thought, assiduously coded in the Vedas, Upanishads, Puranas and Brahamanas, to name a few is a fact undeniable in today's western world. This invincible legacy is carried on by luminaries like Vivekananda, Ramana Maharishi, Swami Ramakrishna, Sri Aurobindo and swami Prabhupada, to name a few. The magnitude and universality of this belief system has stood the test of time.

Tharoor portrays India of the 21st century as a site for injustice, intolerance and bigotry – a portrayal far removed from its utopian past. Citing detailed incidents from the 1980-90 he takes the reader through formation of Jana Sangh, the imposition of emergency, Mrs. Gandhi's assassination, the 1984 anti- Sikh riots, the rise of BJP and the Babri Masjid demolition. These less utopic events in the history of modern India, when juxtaposed against Kautilya's *Arthashastra* or the governance of the mighty Guptas, Cholas and Ashoka, complicates the book to the point of straining. This discourse is messier politically and to me this narrative is a seemingly one –sided urban reading which seems irrelevant as you move to the Indian hinterlands. Tharoor's over simplistic demonizing of the present government as the root cause of all things ailing today's India is not taken without suspicion.

Tharoor extrapolates Deen Dayal Upadhyaya's version of *Bharat Varsha* and how his views on Indian polity are more egalitarian than that of his predecessors like Gowalkar and Savarkar - both of whom were the founder fathers of RSS and are instrumental in the genesis of Jan Sangh which later metamorphosed into the present ruling Party the BJP. Tharoor seems to be in agreement with Upadhyaya and goes at length to explain terms like 'chiti' and 'antyodaya'. What appeals to Tharoor is Upadhyaya's 'Integral Humanism' rather than the founder fathers' selective inclusiveness. Continuing to extol Upadhyaya's Integral Humanism, Tharoor admires the RSS ideologue for not shying away from 'facing the challenge of 'varnavyavastha', which Upadhyaya translates as 'class system'. Upadhyaya disbelieved that people are born into the castes on the basis of their previous births. He asserted that in the past, varnavyavastha was introduced to fulfill the needs of the society by requiring each individual to do what he can do best, the valiant came forward to defense, the studious for advanced learning and so on and so forth. According to Tharoor, the RSS which claims to uphold the values and ethics of a nation (which to them is a Hindu rashtra) is in reality imperialistic and believes in the oppression of dissent. It had secular features only till they followed Deen Dayal Upadhyaya's theory of integral humanism.

Till recently the mainstream Hindus much like his own father have always sought to be accepting and adjusting with all other communities because of the basic tenets of Hinduism being plurality. Tharoor knows this fact very well and says so in the book, but his political compulsions propel him to think otherwise. *Why I Am A Hindu* is based on the stated premise that Hinduism is being hijacked by Hindutva elements, in other words by mob-lynchers, love-jihadis, ghar-wapsis etc. Tharoor, brings to impress upon the reader how far this 'Sanatana Dharma' has come to be (mis)represented by today's Hindutva brigade. In truth, he is smart enough to know that these elements are an outcome of the actions of his party and their ilk for many decades. Actions like glossing over the brutal killings of Tipu Sultan in the name of Islam, burning a train full of pilgrims in revenge to Babri Masjid demolition, upholding the triple talaq for minority votes during Rajiv Gandhi's tenure and the gross contempt of the Supreme court in the Shah Bano case - all these can be summed up as deliberate political appeasement of one community and hence one may counter argue that the Hindutva wave is nothing but the majority community's backlash for assertiveness. It is claimed to be a temporary reactionary phenomenon that will pass once the scales are tipped to balance.

Unfortunately, the erudite author grew up using his great talents in an urban, English-speaking, elite, congress-dominated world. He reached great heights using them, therefore is clever in positioning himself in this book. He knows that his audience is mainly the majority community who is a sympathizer of the present dispensation but of course as a practicing congressman, he has to distance himself sufficiently from their views in order to avoid the ire of his bosses. Therefore, he seems to have been trapped, however, between what his true beliefs are and where his true loyalty lies. So, despite his core belief, he is reluctant to abandon the Congress's 'secularist' narrative however contrary it may sound to anyone. Knowing Tharoor's academic credentials, it is not as if he has stumbled upon the greatness of the glorious Indian past in the process of his research. He is erudite enough to know that Indian constitution based its polity on the premise of Hinduism's Universal values. He knows that our values are beyond the notion of 'the State being Divine and the king being God'; which is a very western and Protestant sentiment.

Tharoor is right when he argues that we Indians as a nation have failed to draw sufficiently from our civilizational wisdom. How are ancient Indian concepts regarding the sacred and mythical, to be scrutinised in the framework of contemporary political history with its ever-changing narrative particularly with the knowledge that such complex concepts can be problematic in a modern largely 'secular' society? Moreover, how does a politically-oriented academic criticism of a 15,000 year civilization cope or claim to be objective and neutral? For many Indians the discourses of freedom, civil rights, human rights and reclamation of a past glory stand in stark contrast to impure post-colonial constructs like caste, demography and gender. When Tharoor picks up his dissent against the Hindutva ideology or the present establishment, it is understandable; given his political leanings towards the congress that are experiencing electoral defeats. Hence, his readers may take his arguments with a fair share of skepticism. Given the larger political context, with its demand for strategic, polemical discourse and polarization, any debate too often leads to boastful claims and mindless discrediting.

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