

Is There a New India? A Conversation with Shashi Tharoor

Interview by Ragini Tharoor Srinivasan

Shashi Tharoor is an Indian author, diplomat, and politician who has twice been elected Member of Parliament from Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala. He was previously Minister of State in the Government of India for External Affairs and Human Resource Development. Tharoor was born in London in 1956, grew up in Bombay and Calcutta, and left India in 1975 for graduate school in the United States. In 1978, at the age of twenty-two, he earned a doctorate from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University, which was published as the monograph *Reasons of State: Political Development and India's Foreign Policy Under Indira Gandhi, 1966–1977*.



Shashi Tharoor. Photo by Aayush Goel.

Until 2007, Tharoor was an official at the United Nations, where he worked for nearly three decades, rising to the rank of Under-Secretary General of the Department of Public Information in 2001. He was India's nominee to replace Kofi Annan as the Secretary General of the United Nations, but finished second to Ban Ki-moon in the 2006 elections for that office. Tharoor has written fifteen works of fiction and nonfiction, including the award-winning *The Great Indian Novel*, which retells contemporary Indian history through the ancient Hindu epic the *Mahabharata*, and a trilogy of nonfiction works on the idea of India. He has also written hundreds of columns for publications including *The New York Times*, *The Hindu*, *The Times of India*, and *Newsweek International*. He currently writes an internationally syndicated monthly column for *Project Syndicate*.

Ragini Tharoor Srinivasan, a doctoral candidate in Rhetoric at the University of California at Berkeley (and, full disclosure, Tharoor's niece), and Tharoor briefly discuss his relationship with India, domestic politics, and India's evolving role in world affairs.

Ragini Tharoor Srinivasan: *Dr. Tharoor, you've had a number of careers, including that of UN Diplomat and Under-Secretary General, successful author of fiction and nonfiction, and recently Member of Parliament in the Indian government. You've also lived much of your life outside of India. How has this dual posture as "outsider" and "insider" informed your view of India's current political, economic, and cultural climate?*

Shashi Tharoor: "Insider" and "outsider" are relative terms, of course. Everyone starts off in a new profession as an outsider, but acquires "insider-ness" with time. Certainly for the bulk of my United Nations career I was indeed an insider—an insider within the UN, that is, but very much an outsider when it came to India. As a writer, I was an outside observer of events, particularly of Indian politics, which I wrote about with academic detachment while animated with a passionate desire to see my country grow and prosper. By "academic detachment," I mean that my views about events in the country were a concerned observer's, not a participant's.

And then I entered Indian politics, acquiring some of the trappings of an insider. I was literally the member of an exclusive political club when I was elected a Member of Parliament, while never quite shedding my outsiderhood—not least because I was a late entrant into a relatively closed profession, where everyone had served alongside each other since their student days. I could never be an insider like them. If anything, many insiders continued to see me as an outsider who had intruded into their space. But

the implied charge that I was a "parachutist" dropped from a distant planet onto their private preserves could be refuted, I believe, by the mere fact that I had stood for election, campaigned, and been chosen by the people—a form of validation that is rarely available to those dubbed outsiders.

Still, I would argue that what you call my "dual posture" is an asset, not a disadvantage, since it enables me to engage with the nuts and bolts of grassroots politics while preserving the perspective that an outsider's reading and analysis of the bigger political picture has given me. I am able, after all, to deal with constituent petitions and local problems while writing columns on national issues. In the process, I never let a purely theoretical understanding inform my political work, nor do I lose the advantage of having seen the wood before I toiled among the trees.

Ragini: *In 2009, after having lived your entire adult life abroad in Singapore, Geneva, and New York, you returned to India and became involved in domestic politics. You appear to be part of a major wave of Indian and Chinese entrepreneurs and authors who see greater economic and personal opportunities in a "rising" Asia than in an allegedly "post-American world." Why did you return to India? To what extent was your return predicated on an assumption of India's comparative fortunes vis-à-vis the "declining" West? Did India feel like "home" upon your return?*

Shashi: In one sense I never really "left," because as a UN official holding on to my Indian passport, I never made the leap of the imagination that



Photo by Aayush Goel.

Though India is rightly allergic to being seen as a US-supported counterweight to a rising China, in practice it is avidly courted by Southeast Asian countries anxious to balance Beijing, a development that suits Washington's interests.

emigration entails. I was an Indian who happened to be abroad because my job obliged me to be, not because I had abandoned my sense of home. Yes, I was physically in a different country, bringing up my children in another land, but I was very consciously a foreign official there—a “nonresident alien,” in US immigration parlance, right through my time abroad. And I was also aware that the UN could transfer me anywhere, to some other country, at any time, so there was no psychological acceptance of a new “home” in my mind. Home was always India, while Geneva, Singapore, New York, and perhaps one day Timbuktu were “duty stations.”

Still, I agree that after thirty-four years of life abroad, returning to India to live there full time involved

some reclaiming of home, at least in the practical sense. But I had visited at least once a year and sometimes more often, so the practical adjustments I had to make—climate, language, clothing, food availabilities, and domestic help in running a household—were minimal, and for the most part welcome. Being back in India gives me a sense of belonging that had largely been absent on the streets of New York, Geneva, and Singapore, where I had lived during my UN career. I was comfortable enough in these places, since I spoke the prevailing languages and had no difficulty living the same kind of life as other residents there, but as a foreign official on quasi-diplomatic “duty,” I never felt these were “my” places. The problems I was preoccupied with were far-flung global issues, not local ones. Whereas in India, it's very much India itself that I am concerned about and Indian problems I'm dealing with. Something in India might be a mess, but it's my mess! If there's something I don't like, it's now my responsibility to do something about it, which wasn't the case for me as a foreigner living abroad.

Ragini: *This year you published *India Shastra: Reflections on the Nation in Our Time*, which you have described as part of a “de facto” trilogy of works on Indian politics, economics, and “hard” and “soft” power in the years since independence in 1947. In *India: From Midnight to Millennium* (1997), you asked, “How can one portray the present, let alone the future, of an ageless civilization that was the birthplace of four major religions, a dozen different traditions of classical dance, eighty-five political parties, and three hundred ways of cooking the potato?” Then, in *The Elephant, the Tiger and the Cellphone: Reflections on India in the Twenty-First Century* (2007), you expressed concern over the rhetoric of India's ascendance as a “future ‘world leader’ [or] ‘the next superpower.’” How has your conception of India's future and possible world leadership changed since the writing of these works?*

Shashi: My conception has remained largely consistent over the years and through my books. India is a remarkable, pluralistic civilization that is resolving some of the central questions confronting humanity in the twenty-first century, and doing so democratically. But I've never been particularly comfortable with the idea of “world leadership,” which I see as an increasingly archaic concept in a globe that is finally moving beyond superpowers. The one category India will definitely lead the world in is population—we are slated to overtake China by 2024—and that's not a particularly welcome distinction. It will give us that much larger a share of the world's problems to have to resolve. But I would rather we set an example for the world than that we consciously seek to lead it—and that we work cooperatively within our global networks to help create a more just, equitable, and multipolar world than the one I grew up in.

We are living in a world in which one defining paradigm for foreign policy is impossible. The binary Cold War era is over. There are no longer two superpowers to be nonaligned between. Instead, my metaphor for international relations is really that of the World Wide Web. In this increasingly networked world, we are going to have to work through multiple networks, and those networks will sometimes overlap with each other with common memberships, but sometimes they will be distinct; they all serve our interests in different ways and for different purposes. So we are able to belong to both the United Nations, a universal organization that has 193 member states, and to SAARC (the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) that has only our neighbors. We can belong both to the non-aligned movement, which reflects our experience of colonialism, and the Community of Democracies, which reflects our sixty-five years of experience as a democracy. We can belong to the global “trade union” of developing countries, the G-77 (Group of 77), which now has over 120 countries, and belong also to “management,” the G-20 (Group of 20 developed and developing countries in charge of global macroeconomic policy). We can be with Russia and China in the trilateral RIC, add Brazil and South Africa in BRICS, subtract Russia and China in IBSA, and retain China but exclude Russia in BASIC!* We have the great ability to be in all these great institutional networks pursuing different objectives with different allies and partners, and in each finding a valid purpose that suits us. That is what I call “multialignment.”

Ragini: *Even though you've cautioned that it is important that India attend to relations with not only global powers like the US and China but its other neighbors as well, what does India stand to gain from its relationship with the United States in the twenty-first century? And what does the United States stand to learn from a “global” new India? Please also address what you see as the most critical aspects of the India-China relationship.*

Shashi: The US relationship is hugely important to India. Though India is rightly allergic to being seen as a US-supported counterweight to a rising China, in practice it is avidly courted by Southeast Asian countries anxious to balance Beijing, a development that suits Washington's interests. President Barack Obama's two visits to New Delhi have cemented a perception that the two countries shared an increasingly convergent worldview, common democratic values, and a thriving trade. The United States is India's largest trading partner if you take goods and services together.

*RIC, BRICS, IBSA, and BASIC are acronyms for groupings or associations of countries using the first letter(s) of their names e.g., RIC stands for Russia, India, and China and BASIC stands for Brazil, South Africa, India, and China.

American exports to India have, in the last five years, grown faster than any other country. The Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) estimates that services trade between the two countries is likely to grow, despite the recent global financial crisis and the US recession that sparked it, from the present US \$60 billion to over US \$150 billion in the next six years. Agreements on seemingly mundane subjects like agriculture, education, health, and even space exploration and energy security testify to enhanced cooperation, and the two governments have also proclaimed “initiatives” on clean energy and climate change, as well as educational linkages between American and Indian universities. The announcements of significant trade and investment deals by the two governments have confirmed that each nation is developing a more significant stake in the other than ever before.

I’m not sure the US has a great deal to “learn” from India, as you put it, but it certainly gains from having a partner in Asia that’s a democracy, one with close economic links to Washington, no important strategic differences, and a shared anxiety about China.

As for China itself, I advocate cooperation, not confrontation. Our burgeoning trade, at nearly US \$70 billion, contributes to a positive atmosphere between our two countries. It ensures that China has far too high a stake in the Indian economy to contemplate engaging in any military adventurism against India. There are some strategic advantages to offering a potential adversary a large market: it is more likely that the Chinese establishment will learn to see Indians as consumers rather than enemies. Not that I’m suggesting that India in any way prostrate itself before Chinese power. I am, as I have described myself in the context of Pakistan, something of a “hawkish dove.” I don’t flinch from recommending a military show of strength, taking proactive steps of our own to strengthen our border infrastructure and to deepen our maritime capabilities in the Indian Ocean while China is still focused on the northern waters closer to its shores. But I would not seek conflict with China. Instead, I would explore the many compatible areas of mutual interest we share, such as in keeping open the sea lanes of communication in the Indian Ocean.

Ragini: *You recently edited a volume of essays titled India: The Future Is Now (2013). In that work, you repeated a line familiar to your readers: “The old joke [is] that anything you say about India, the opposite is also true ... Quite often, the opposites coexist quite cheerfully.” Of course, as you know, the “cheerful” coexistence of opposites has always been more rhetorical than real. You have written extensively about the contradictions of India’s being both “a superpower” and “super poor.” Is this another contradiction on the level of those coexisting opposites to which you have often referred? Or, as critics like Arundhati Roy have argued, is India’s “super” poverty an enabling condition of its being a “superpower” in the twenty-first century?*

Shashi: Actually, the opposites are real enough—extreme poverty and flourishing dollar billionaires, oppressed women and empowered women, excellence in IT while two-thirds of our population still scratch a living from soil. The nation is full of such paradoxes, and they coexist cheerfully in the sense that both sets of circumstances are widely accepted by all, including those enduring such conditions. But aside from my disinclination to seek superpowerdom for India, our “super poor” have to be enabled to lead more decent lives, and that must be the central locus of policy. I have always argued that whether we grow at 5 percent or 9 percent, our principal priority must be the bottom 25 percent of our society, who have not benefited enough from the growth and prosperity that has accompanied our rise as a nation in the last twenty years. We must get rid of our “superpoor” status, not as an enabling condition for “superpower” status, but because it’s necessary for our people to lead decent lives with dignity.

Ragini: *In the past decade, you have written books and reviewed works by authors like Anand Giridharadas and Siddhartha Deb, which together describe the ascendance of a “new India” on the world stage. These assertions of India’s newness follow in a long tradition inaugurated by*

There are some strategic advantages to offering a potential adversary a large market: it is more likely that the Chinese establishment will learn to see Indians as consumers rather than enemies.



Source: *The Hindu* at <http://tinyurl.com/o86j8oc>.

Jawaharlal Nehru’s “Tryst with Destiny” speech on the eve of India’s independence: “A moment comes, which comes but rarely in history, when we step out from the old to the new . . .” Some scholars have argued that the imperative of being “new” and making a break with history has in fact hindered the postcolonial nation-state’s developmental aspirations. Do you agree? Is there a “new India”? And if so, what is its relationship to modernity, globalization, and the West?

Shashi: Yes, there is. The unchanging, timeless India of Western cliché was probably always a myth, but it has never seemed more illusory than after independence, given the social and economic transformations that have convulsed India. There is an extraordinary degree of change and ferment. Dramatic transformations are taking place that amount to little short of a revolution—in politics, economics, society, and culture. In politics, we have gone from single-party governance to a coalition era. In economics, we have gone from protectionism to liberalization, even given the hesitancy of governments looking over their electoral shoulders. In caste and social relations, we have witnessed convulsive changes; who could have imagined, for 3,000 years, that a woman from the “untouchable” community of outcastes would rule India’s largest state, Uttar Pradesh, as Mayawati has done three times? It’s still true that in many parts of India, when you cast your vote, you vote your caste. But that too has brought about profound alterations in the country, as the lower castes have taken advantage of the ballot to seize electoral power. And in cultural affairs, with the notion of Hindutva being proclaimed, and argued and debated from the rooftops in recent years, we have had a searching reexamination of identity. Now, any of these transformations could have been enough to throw another country into a turbulent revolution. But we have had all four in India and yet we have absorbed them, and made all the changes work, because the Indian revolution is a democratic one, sustained by a larger idea of India, an India that safeguards the common space available to each identity, an India that remains safe for diversity. ■