

## Tradition and Modernity in Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel*

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### ABSTRACT

Tradition nourishes culture and infuses vivacity into modernity. This effort describes how Shashi Tharoor has used myth to combine tradition with modernity to delineate essential practices of Indian civilization in *The Great Indian Novel*. Accordingly, this paper attempts to identify his sources and resources in order to underline his novelty, artistic imagination, and at times his deliberate deviations in interpretation of customary legacies. The use of symbols, motifs, and allusions has been highlighted to project amalgamation of tradition and modernity. The motive has been to appreciate the depiction of traditional Indian bearings and bring out essential norms, practices, belief, and rituals pertaining to Indian civilization. A note of criticism lurks in to discard descriptions describing distorted realities.

**Keywords-** Civilization. Modernity. Myth. Practice. Tradition.

India has been a land of *Shruti*—"that which is heard". According to Manusmriti, the Vedas are *Shruti*. It means that in ancient times knowledge was imparted via oral tradition from one generation to another. *Smriti*, *Pathan*, *Paathan*, and *Uccharan* were methods of imparting knowledge. Hence, tradition helps in preserving cultural practices, moral codes, or guiding beliefs. The pursuance an essential practice for centuries without interruption turns it into a tradition. When some new elements are fused into any traditional practice, it gives rise to modernity. According to Joseph R. Gusfield, tradition and modernity are extensively pitted against each other but they give rise to a change. He believes that modernity does not inevitably enfeeble tradition He notices a synthesis of both in Gandhism. For, he united traditional Indian practices with modern ideas of democracy, liberty and reform to achieve Independence. Gusfield adds that:

...the all too common practice of pitting tradition and modernity against each other as paired opposites tends to overlook the mixtures and blends which reality displays. Above all, it becomes an ideology of antitraditionalism, denying the necessary and usable ways in which

the past serves as support... to the present and the future. (362)

The Mahabharata is itself both: traditional as well as modern. It is traditional in the sense that it has preserved the glories of Indian dynasties; yet it is modern because it continues to appear and re-appear in various contemporary art forms in a modified manner. Gangaji's thoughts about Princess Kunti are far more progressive of the time. His evaluation of the maiden's character is not based on shallow patriarchal perspectives. It is unbiased. He carefully examines the circumstances which made an inexperienced young maiden fall into possible "blandishments of a certain Hyperion Helios". He asserts before Pandu:

For myself, having reviewed all the elements of the case, I cannot see that much blame attaches to the Princess Kunti. If we were all to be punished for ever for the errors of our youth, the world would be a particularly gloomy place. Certainly, there has been no suggestion of the slightest misconduct since by the lady...(Gangaji, 46)

Interestingly, Pandu's character swings back and forth between tradition and modernity. He longs for a son to attain salvation which enthuse him to liberate Kunti to search a surrogate father. He reads scriptures to learn about Indian tradition but ends up preaching modern ideas of ancient times. He cites "shastras" to change Kunti's perspective on morality and conservatism. It is true that ancient India gave relative freedom to women in terms of love, marriage, and sensuality. They were free to make choices in terms of who they marry or make love with without any stigma attached to them. Practice of *swayamvara*, widow-remarriage, and post puberty marriages were common. This argument can also be linked with the concept of society. There have been different laws for social life and nomadic life. As per natural law theory, everyone holds some inherent rights which are conferred not by any written code but by "God, nature or reason". Hence, the choice of women to fulfil personal desire and satiate carnal passions must be viewed in the context of natural law over social.

The social life of ancient times seems to be moral liberal than it is now. Women had equal rights of attending religious discourse and philosophical convocation. Gargi, Lopmudra, Ghosha, and Maitrey are just few women who were known as *Brahmavadini* (that is, women ascetics). These female scholars strove for the highest literary pursuits. Gargi is well-known for challenging the great sage Yajnavalkya in a debate. She openly questioned the sage on subjects like metaphysics, environment, cosmology, and the universe. This was in stark contrast with post-Vedic period or medieval period when women got confined to super-imposed prudery and morality. The practice of purdah, as Pandu asserts, is not Indian at all. Evidently, it came after Muslim invasion in the country. The institution of marriage and concept of monogamous society are relatively new. Married women were allowed to exercise their personal freedom and it attracted no objection from their male counterparts. Thus, Pandu exclaims:

One married to one woman, both remaining faithful to each other, is a relatively new idea, which does not enjoy the traditional sanction of custom. (Which is why I myself have had no qualms about taking two wives.) So I really don't mind you...with another man to give me a son. It may seem funny to you, but the deeper I steep myself in our traditions, the more liberal I become. (86)

Observance of fast has also been a traditional Indian practice. It is associated with various age-old rituals, customs, and personal beliefs. In the Mahabharata, Yudishtir questions Bhishma, "what constitutes the highest penances?". The later states that abstinence from food is a supreme form of penance. Fasting also stems out of one's personal faith that abstinence leads closeness to God or pleases the Supreme energy to grant boons. Hence,

Pandu meditates for a year and observes fasts along with Kunti to please Indra. Fasting is considered one of the means to purge one with impurities and prepare the self to achieve higher purposes—a sacred resolve to attain some heavenly pursuits. It is rewarded to both in the form of Arjun. Tharoor gives a slight twist to his narrative technique while describing Kunti's abstinence for food. He does it to enhance the appeal of the narrative for modern readers; a pinch of laughter is fused when she complains Pandu about the abstinence:

It's all very well for you, but you're not the one who has to grow, and swell, and become heavy, and retch into the sink in the morning, and give up biryanis and wine and swings because they make you sick, and suffer the pain and the heaving and the agony of a thousand hot fingers... (111)

Thereby, one finds modern Kunti in a traditional epic who enjoys a "Turkish cigarette", waits for her husband to light it, and takes a quick puff. Kunti later in the novel wraps a *Banarasi* sari, does her nails in Bombay style, puts on Bangalore sandals, and wears Bareilly bangles. Exclusiveness of royal mannerism is replaced with an air of elegance—typical of modern Indian women belonging to elite class.

Tharoor underlines the motives of Indians for observing fast. To common Indian it is one of the methods of "altruistic self-denial." This argument can be interpreted profoundly. The practice has something to do with one's psychic experience rather than physical. It strengthens moral conviction, religious zeal, and spiritual pursuits. It enriches one's unique yet individual sense of metaphysical experience. In some cases, it reinforces the forgotten bond of a devotee to his God. It is like preparing the subconscious for the attainment of salvation as a farmer readies his land with essential manure before sowing seed. The novelist compares traditional Indian fast with modern Western diet. Each of them relates with a different cause. The western women skip their meal in order to burn calories and reduce excess pounds; the Indian counterparts dedicate their "starvation to a cause, usually a male one."

To Gangaji fasting was a symbol of sharing the popular suffering arising out of starvation. It was an empathetic outburst which gushed out when he saw malnourished children and utter hopelessness of the labour class at Budge-Budge. Hence, when he utters the immortal words "Fasting in my business", he really meant so. For, to free the helpless and the maimed and to untie the shackles of British induced hardships was, now, his business. He decided not to eat or drink until the workers demands are met. It was Gangaji's "terrible" vow—a *Bhishma Pratigya*—which melted cold hearts, inspired millions, and moved mountains. His fast was his individual contribution in the protest against the mill-owner. Fasting to him was a non-violent way of projecting

his solemn resolve, that is, not to bow before what he considered wrong. It was a silent slap of a fakir on the meaty cheeks of ruthless exploiters. The perpetrators believed that it was Gangaji's threatening attempt to finish them off. They were alarmed and Gangaji felt relieved—as "he had his objective achieved". The Englishmen and the mill owner could not understand his philosophy pertaining to fasting and regarded it as "blackmail". He clarifies, Sarah-behn that he is not fasting to make the mill-owners change their minds, rather, I am fasting to strengthen the worker's resolve: "I am fasting to strengthen the worker's resolve to show them how firmly they must hold their beliefs if they expect them to triumph. My fast demonstrates my conviction, that is all." (130) Eventually, the traditional Indian practice washed away the modern mills' resistance, the Association had to "give-in". Fasting ignited collective consciousness against subjugation. It was Gangaji's non-violent weapon against foreign forces. He used the method to strengthen his convictions against himself and to teach commoners to resist injustice with indigenous arms. It united the people; and they joined hands with Gangaji—the students abstained from taking meal, the villagers kept their homes unlit, and the weak showed no sign of weariness in order to express their sincere solidarity with him.

Tharoor, here, portrays how the seed of sacrifice was sown in Indians by the great-soul. Gangaji taught by exemplification rather than recitation. He suffered silently and it enhanced his actions' appeal among ardent followers. He embraced the path of sacrifice willingly, nobly, and bravely. He was preparing the soil of young hearts out of which the sprout of defiance will crack one day. His philosophy emphasized that if one wishes to bring dreams to life, one should be ready to die for it. And the people surrendered. The efficacy of Gangaji's fasting lay in the fact that it created a generation of ardent nationalists willing to sacrifice their all for the cause of motherland.

In modern parlance, the same practice has been reduced to sheer mockery. As Immanuel Sagaya Selvan rightly observes that Tharoor has depicted this degradation of fasting in contemporary times. The author asserts that fasts prove "affective only when the target of your action values your life more than his convictions". (135) It is true that fasting did not work as a method of protest in other nations. In India too its application has not yielded desired results except in a few cases—for example—Anna Hazare's fasting protest for Lokpal Bill in 2011. It is because now fasting is observed for selfish pursuits. The underlying basis of uprightness, self-sacrifice, and self-harm for universal good is now remote to the observers. Their resolve rests on shaky foundation of self-interest than commoners' will-being. Devotion, suffering, and sacrifice for the greater common good are unknown. Tharoor laments at the modern political street shows replete with hypocritical mockery:

If more politicians, Ganpathi, had the courage to fast in the face of what they saw as transcendent wrong, Indian governments might have found it impossible to govern. But too many would be fasters proclaim their self-denial and then retreat to surreptitious meals behind the curtain, which makes their demands easier to resist since there is no likelihood of their doing any real harm to themselves (136).

Undeniably, fasts have met an ignoble fate in modern times. They are not paid heed to because the intent of the observers is not selfless. Gangaji's point of self-denial and firm conviction has been forgotten. Tharoor aptly amounts that's "all we are left today with is the drama without the sacrifice". And it is, indeed, a sorry state of Indian politics devoid of any resolute and noble ideology.

In short, Shashi Tharoor depicts the perpetuity and constancy of traditional practices, for instance, abidance to marital institution, adherence to vows, and observance of fasts. Evidently, the glorious Indian tradition, though modified, still marches through the assemblage of modernity.

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