CHAPTER TWO

SHASHI THAROOR: A MAN AND ARTIST
Shashi Tharoor, a London-born, America-educated author and diplomat, was born on March 9, 1956 to Lila Chandran Tharoor, in England. He went to school in Mumbai, high school in Calcutta and Stephen’s College in Delhi. He spent his time pursuing other activities than in the classroom. As a theatre buff and successful actor, he played Antony to Mira Nair’s Cleopatra in the production of *Antony and Cleopatra* in 1974. He spent his time pursuing other activities than in the teaching room; it was an exciting experience for him. He (tharoor.in) confesses:

...I did a lot of acting in school and college. I believe that one could do more with human relationships and friendships, one could certainly learn more, develop one’s interest and tastes. For me idleness is a sin.

2.1 Marital Life:

Tharoor has twin sons, Ishan and Kanishk from his first marriage to Tilottama Mukharji, an academic who he knew from his school days in Calcutta. Both sons attended Yale University. Ishan writes for Times Magazine’s international edition in Hong Kong; whereas Kanishk is an editor at Open Democracy in London. Ishan has written a wide range of stories, including cover stories on Nepal and the Phillipines. Kanishk is a journalist and a writer of fiction, for which he was nominated for a US National Magazine Award in 2009. Later, Shashi was married to Christa, a Canadian working at the United Nations. After their divorce, he went on to his third marriage; he married Sunanda Pushkar in a quiet ceremony, at his ancestral home in Elavanchery village in Kerala’s Palakkad district on 22nd August, 2010.

2.2 Educational Career:

Shashi went to the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts. His undergraduate degree was an honours degree in history. His degree certificates lists both Tufts and Harvard. He completed M.A. and M.A.L.D. (Master in Law and Diplomacy) and Ph.D. from the same school. His Ph. D. thesis was on the working of the way in which Indian Foreign Policy was made during Indira Gandhi’s first administration 1966 to 1977. He published his thesis titled *Reasons of State*. But for him education is still going on. He (Interview: 1999) says:
I am learning as much as I can from the mere process of living.

At childhood, Tharoor was an asthmatic child, which meant he was often bed-ridden. He considered books his oxygen. He would finish his own books very fast, exhausted those of his parents books he could understand. He had an inconvenient habit of finishing library books in the car on the way from the library. He (tharoor.in) said:

Books were the salvation. I read voraciously. When I rapidly exhausted the books available to me, I wrote. Writing caught up with my very existence. It gave me a way of escaping my own suffering.

In the spare time, he used to write for own amusement and his parents took the writing very seriously. They got his writing typed up and circulated to his friends. At the age of ten, his first story appeared in print, which had been sent off to a newspaper by his father. The effect of the written word became further evident to him. He (tharoor.in) exposes:

It was a thrill comparable to the first kiss, an intensely passionate memory that makes you want to keep going.

2.3 Diplomatic Career:

Shashi Tharoor’s diplomatic career began in the United Nations in 1978, as a staff member of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Geneva. From 1981 to 1984 he headed the UNHCR office in Singapore during the boat people crisis. In 1989, he was appointed as the special Assistant to the Under-Secretary-General for special political affairs, the unit that later became the Peacekeeping Operations in New York.

In 1996, he was appointed Director of Communications for Special Projects and as an executive assistant to the Secretary-General Kofi Annan. In January 2001, he was again appointed as the Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information and as the head of Department of Public Information (UNDPI). He was responsible for the communication strategy, enhancing the image and effectiveness of the UN. In 2003, the Secretary-General assigned him additional responsibility of United Nations Coordinator for
multilingualism. On 9th February 2007 he resigned from the post of UN Under-Secretary-General and left the UN in April, 2007.

2.4 Political Career in India:

In March 2009, Shashi Tharoor contested the Indian General Election as a Congress Party candidate from Tiruvananthapuram (Lok Sabha Constituency) in Kerala. Despite being criticised as an ‘elite outsider,’ he won the elections by the margin of approximately one lakh votes. Subsequently, he was elected as a minister of State in the council of Ministers of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. On 28th May, 2009 he was sworn in as the Indian Minister of State for External Affairs.

He used and has been using his own political website www.tharoor.in and new media technologies like twitter which quickly earned him a celebrity status. He went on to become the first Indian celebrity to get one lakh followers on twitter. However, some of his tweets proved controversial and were quoted by opposition parties and the press to criticise his work. On 18th April 2010, he resigned from his post as a Minister of State for External Affairs on instructions from Prime Minister Manmohan Singh following allegations that he had misused his office to get shares in the IPL cricket franchise of Cochin. He stoutly denied the charges and called for a full inquiry. On May 2010, he was again nominated to be a member of the Parliamentary Standing Committee for External Affairs by Lok Sabha Speaker Meira Kumar. At present, he is working as a Minister of State for Human Resource Development.

2.5 Awards and Recognitions:

Tharoor has been the recipient of several awards such as ‘Rajika Kripalani Young Journalist Award’ for the best Indian Journalist under thirty in 1976. He won the ‘Federation of Indian Publishers-Hindustan Times Literary Award’ for The Great Indian Novel in 1990 and Commonwealth Writer’s Prize in 1991 for the best book of the year in the Eurasian region. He was awarded with ‘Excelsior Award’, in 1998, for his excellence in literature by the Association of Indians in America (AIA) and the Network of Indian Professionals (Net IP). In January 1998, the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, named Dr. Tharoor, ‘A Global Leader of Tomorrow’. In May 2000, he received the honorary degree of ‘Doctor
of Letters’ at International Affairs from the University of Puget Sound. India’s highest honour for non-resident Indians ‘Pravasi Bharatiya Samman’ has been conferred upon him. Besides these, he was awarded the Zakir Hussain Memorial’s ‘Pride of India’ award in January 2009 and the ‘Hakim Khan Sur Award’ for national integration by the Maharana of Udaipur on 15th March 2009.

2.6 Literary Career:

Shashi Tharoor is a name that matters in the post colonial Indian English literature which is the result of a series of ceaseless experimentations and innovations by a generation of Indian novelists (which includes Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Vikram Seth, Allan Selay, Upamanyu Chatterjee, Farukh Dhandy, Robinson Mistry, Firdaus Kanga and so on) so that it could acquire verve and vitality, richness and resilience, influencing perception of history, social ethos, culture and politics of the nation. Like his colleagues, Shashi too plays with the past to illustrate the present, exploits history to assess the immediate and deconstruct the whole scenario to fabricate a better tomorrow. Being a Diplomat by profession, he (tharoor.in) confesses:

Writing is my lifeblood.

Tharoor’s modus operandi thus, is to inhabit the space of a suave metropolitan and explain India’s history, cultural traditions and political conditions through diasporic, post colonial or cosmopolitan models, while attempting to speak for India, in all her idealised potential. Such a tenuous connectivity between experiential reality and nostalgic, romanticised utopianism is visible both in his fiction and non-fiction. His ideology consists of construction out of deconstruction, frequent visit to the new land to reshape it with the appreciation of the past and yet unable to provide the finality. He (tharoor.in) admits:

The issues that have made India and nearly unmade India are part of my being...all my writings have demonstrated that there are a number of things about India that augur well for the future. But as an Indian, I feel a responsibility to draw attention to those things that do not augur well.
Most of his literary creations are centered on Indian themes and they are markedly ‘Indo-nostalgic.’ He has been a highly regarded columnist in each of India’s three best known English newspapers, most recently *The Hindu* newspaper from 2001 to 2008 and in a weekly column ‘Shashi on Sunday’ in the *Times of India* from January 2007 to December 2008. Previously, he was columnist for the *Gentleman* magazine and the Indian Express newspaper, as well as a frequent contributor to *Newsweek international* and the *International Herald Tribune*. His book reviews have been appeared in the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times*. His monthly column ‘India Reawakening’, distributed by project syndicate, appears in some eighty newspapers around the world.

Tharoor began writing at the age of six and his first published story appeared in the *Bharat Jyoti*, the Sunday edition of the *Free Press Journal* in Mumbai, when he was just ten years old. His World War II adventure novel *Operation Bellows*, inspired by the Biggles Books was serialised in the *Junior Statesman* starting a week before his eleventh birthday. Each of his books has been the best seller in India. He has lectured widely on India and is often quoted for his observations as he (1989:18) states:

> India is not, as people keep calling it, an underdeveloped country, but rather, in the context of its history and cultural heritage, a highly developed one in an advanced state of decay.

His doctoral dissertation *Reasons of State*, published in 1982, is a revised version of the thesis submitted for the completion of Ph.D. at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Medford, Massachusetts, U. S. A. It is a study of the political development in the field of foreign policy. It is a work written with maximum exposure to his educational environment. It examines India’s foreign policy during 1966-1977 under the administration of Mrs. Indira Gandhi. This non-fiction can be divided into three distinct sections. The first section provides Tharoor’s insight in the background of the Indira epoch. The author examines Indira’s antecedents: Jawaharlal Nehru and Lal Bahadur Shashtri. It is from them that she has inherited the legacy and the strategy of India’s foreign policy. In the second section, Tharoor investigates and analyses the foreign policy of Indira Gandhi. It also studies the part of opposition and the ministry of external affairs in
the foreign policy of India. In the last and third section, the author has examined the response, pressure of public opinion, interest groups and the press. The author takes a stand of his study on a Warren Illchaman’s study of the Nehru era and Lloyd Jensen’s study of the levels of political development and inter-state conflict in South Asia. The foreign policy assesses in its domestic context the evolving process, with the influences along with the perception of the Prime Minister regarding the strategy she has adopted. It also evaluates at large the Prime Minister’s cabinet, its MEA secretariat and its idealistic approach to the international affairs. Tharoor traces the causes and the consequences of changes made during the tenure of Mrs. Indira Gandhi. Moreover, the author is concerned about the positive developments that have gained respectable position in spite of his limitations and public pressures.

In a nutshell, Reasons of State is a scholarly study of Indian foreign policy making. The span of the study starts with the freedom of India and Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru as the first Prime Minister; the intellectual investigation ends with Indira Gandhi as the Prime Minister. The study stresses the several influences of the Prime Ministers over the foreign policy of India. The scholarly work makes us aware of the role of bureaucrats in the ministry of external affairs. Tharoor (Interview: 1999) replies the interviewer about his educational vocation as:

...in India, I’ve known and grown up and cherished and valued that such a thing could even be possible. And though the emergency ended with free and fair election in which Mrs. Gandhi was routed and the system of suspension of democracy was repudiated once and for all. We’ve never had anything close to it, ever since – I felt at that time, because that was the age that I would have to have taken those exams that show how the idea of serving the government that could do and perhaps would do it again was simply anathema to me. For that reason, I did a Ph. D. instead of going and taking the exams and ended up working for the United Nations instead of my own government.

Tharoor discovers that there are many institutes that are not functioning the way they are meant to. It is a study of how the functioning of such institutions can be overruled by the imperious Prime Minister. He lays bare the prejudices inherent in our foreign policy. Tharoor’s prose is unmetaphorical and austere. His language
is the same as used in dailies and weeklies; it is straightforward and sticks to the matter of fact. But it admirably communicates the Indian sensibility of the stratum of society that he chooses to portray in his fiction. He uses limited vocabulary and never waxes poetic nor does he charge his language with emotion. Even the most delicate touching moments of life are presented in the same simple style.

Shashi Tharoor appeared and emerged as a forceful literary artist, on the literary scene and in Indian Diaspora in 1989 with his first work of fiction, *The Great Indian Novel* and established himself in the front rank of contemporary Indian writers in English. The book won second major literary awards and was highly acclaimed by critics in India and abroad.

In spite of holding responsible positions in professional life, Tharoor successfully combined two different vocations – diplomacy and writing. As an author, he has written many editorials, commentaries and short stories in Indian and western publications. Tharoor’s first novel *The Great Indian Novel* (1989) is a political satire which interprets, with flamboyant style and uncommon fluency, *The Mahabharata* as India’s modern history from the country’s struggle against British Raj to the emergency and its aftermath. The interpretation of reality through myth and history often results in thinly veiled caricatures of well-known characters and situations from the epic and politics. But Tharoor’s avowed aim in this novel is to affirm Indian cultural identity by highlighting its pluralism and openness. He (1990:8) says ‘*The Great Indian Novel* is a spirited acknowledgement and a bold assertion of:

The multiplicity of truth that has given shape and substance to the idea of India.

His second work of fiction, *The Five Dollar Smile* – a collection of short stories and a play was published in 1990. Most of the stories were written when Tharoor was in his late teens and early twenties. With the exception of ‘Solitude of the Short-Story Writer,’ the stories are set in India and they deal with cosmopolitan city-dwellers who, in spite of being increasingly seduced by western culture, still sustain an emotional attachment for the countryside they had left long ago. The most moving piece in the anthology is, of course, the title story in which a lonely orphan, who is used as the poster child of an organisation that raises
money for the purpose of charity, is determined to visit the family in America that has adopted him. He writes to them touching letters about his ambition which result in an air-ticket for a three week visit to the U.S.A. But during the flight, the boy surrounded by strangers – experiences a bout of intense and inexplicable loneliness that leaves him completely dispirited. By turn funny and touching, the stories also deal with the trauma of youth as well as death, deceit, hypocrisy and the conflict of cultural change.

Tharoor’s second novel, *Show Business*, is a pungent satire on the Bombay film industry, which came out in 1992. The book was subsequently adapted into a motion picture called *Bollywood*. The narrative follows the career of a famous film-star Ashok Banjara, from the period when the struggling actor tried to find a foothold in the film world to the time when he fought for survival after a fatal accident in a shooting zone. The character of Banjara is modeled on Amitabh Bachchan whose life closely parallels to that of the fictional hero. As a backdrop to Banjara’s rise to the acme of Bombay’s commercial cinema is a non-stop carousel of the major blockbusters he (Blurb) has acted in:

A never ending fantasy, that took over his life completely and transformed it into an astonishing, though compelling, lie.

Tharoor uses film, which he considers to be an important medium for transmitting fictional experience to the Indian masses, as a creative metaphor to explore the contemporary myths which are invented by the popular Hindi cinema and through them certain aspects of Indian life. Through a montage of narrative, shooting scripts, songs and monologues, he invents a fictional world that becomes an expressive metaphor for deeper truths: illusion and reality, ambition and greed, love, deception and death.

The novel begins as an interesting portrayal of India’s film industry that single handedly pumps powerfully nationalist ideology into Indian mass culture, serving as one of the most popular forms of entertainment for the millions of people of the land. This theme seems to be in line with Tharoor’s wish to emulate Moliere - to edify and entertain. The Indian film industry dubbed as “Bollywood” by academics and journalists, has a huge impact on the Indian diaspora all over the globe. This is one of the foci of the novel. Tharoor’s protagonist Ashok Banjara
goes from being a ruined theatre devotee to a successful matinee idol to a failed politician to ultimately emerging as folk hero because of an accident on the film set. Some readers have commented, in casual conversations, that Banjara is a thinly veiled portrayal of Amitabh Bachchan, an aging Lothario, a very popular Indian movie star, who blundered into politics at Rajiv Gandhi’s behest. Tharoor’s genre experiments are revealed in the manner in which the novel moves between monologues and dramatic scripts.

His third novel *Riot: A Novel*, was published to much critical acclaim in 2001. A vibrant work of fiction about the communal flare-up in northern India in the wake of Ram Janambhumi movement by Hindu extremists in late 1980s and 1990s, the book takes on a wide range of topics. On one level, Tharoor examines the reasons of communal tension between the Hindus and the Muslims through the postmortem of a fictional riot. He engages with this palpable tension with much insight, offering in the process a balanced critique of both the Hindu cultural nationalism and the Muslim fundamentalism and a convincing account of the role of the administration in controlling riots. On another level, the book is concerned with unraveling the mystery that surrounds the murder of an idealistic American student and welfare worker, Priscilla Hart, who comes to India to volunteer in women’s health programme, during the riot. The novel highly praised for its brilliant experimentation with narrative form, chronicles the unresolved mystery of Priscilla Hart’s murder through the mutually contradictory accounts of a group of characters who narrate their individual versions of the events which led to the tragedy. Intellectually challenging and emotionally engrossing:

*Riot* is a fictional *tour-de-force* about the ownership of history, about love, hate, cultural collision, religious fanaticism and the impossibility of knowing the truth. (p.5)

His next book, *India: From Midnight to the Millennium*, was published in 1997, written to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of India’s independence; the book examines what the emancipation from colonial rule meant for the country, providing in the process a perceptive analysis of her past, present and future. Tharoor combines elements of political scholarship, personal reflection, polemic, memoir and fiction in the book which deals with a wide range of subjects
including India’s rich cultural heritage, her contribution to the western world and the strength of Indian democracy as well as the country’s economic reforms, caste systems and governmental corruption.

In the book, he attempts to position India, which he says is poised on the brink of being one of the most populous. Therefore, he wants to correct two telescopic views of India that the west has: as a pre-modern, ex-colony and as a third world nation in the throes of a failed socialism. The arguments in the book are meant to position India in the twenty-first century as a nation that is able and willing to function in a global and cosmopolitan milieu. The tone of the book, however, is triumphal and apologetic by turns. The following passage from the first chapter of the book entitled “A Myth and an Idea” shows Tharoor spanning this divide between confidence in India’s intelligentsia and hesitation in making overt claims. The chapter begins:

…it is true that no other country in the world embraces the extraordinary mixture of ethnic groups, the profusion of mutually incomprehensible languages, the varieties of topography and climate, the diversity of religions and cultural practices and the range of economic development that India does. (p.1)

Tharoor’s fanaticism in speaking of India-the-nation is consigned to the borders and dismissed by imperial egotism. Tharoor unwittingly gives it to the colonial dialectic, hinting the reader that perhaps Churchill was wrong, but never quite articulating that anti-colonial statement. Again a few paragraphs later ask a series of questions allowing the reader to form his opinion of India in a contemporary, competing global arena:

How does one come to terms with a country whose population is fifty-one per cent illiterate, but which has educated the world’s second largest pool of trained scientists and engineers? How does one gauge a culture that elevated non-violence to an effective moral principle, but whose freedom was born in blood and whose independence still soaks in it? How does one explain a land where peasant organizations and suspicious officials attempt to close down Kentucky Fried Chicken as a threat to the nation, where a former prime minister bitterly criticizes the sale of Pepsi-cola “in a country where villagers don’t have drinking water,” and which yet invents the greatest quantity of sophisticated
India: from Midnight to the Millennium, is an exceptionally well reasoned and through reply from what, in India, would be regarded as the westernised liberal camp. Blending memoir, essay and empirical argument, Tharoor carefully reviews the core questions about India’s unfinished experiment in self-governance, the durability of it, constitutional democracy, its persistent struggles over caste, the rise of Hindu extremist politics and the recent historic attempt to catch up to Asia’s economic figures through adoption of free market reforms. The text discusses forcefully, that democracy is essential to India’s progress, that caste discrimination is vanishing and can be overcome, that politicians who distort Hinduism as a means of nationalism and majority politics should be rejected and that Nehru’s bloated socialist economic model must give way to free trade and entrepreneurialism, above all giving the enormous challenges of India’s ethnic, religious and linguistic polyglot.

His next book, Nehru: The Invention of India, published in 2003 explores Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India, as the dynamic figure in altering the position of the nation on the map of the world. Further, The Elephant, the Tiger and the Cellphone: India, the Emerging 21st Century Power, published in 2007, discusses and demystifies the vast changes that have taken place in India to transform this once sleeping giant into an emerging world leader.

Tharoor’s latest work, Bookless in Baghdad is published in 2005. It is a collection of book reviews, literary musings and columns on writers like V. S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Rudyard Kipling and P. G. Woodhouse. Apart from perceptive and highly readable essays like ‘Mining the Mahabharata’, ‘Bhartiya Sanskrit in the Big Apple’ and the ‘The Cultural Geography of Criticism’ , the anthology contains personalised self-commentary on the condition of a literary exile, an Indian author abroad; who is adrift in an ocean of western culture.

His most recent book, Pax Indica: India and the World of the Twenty-first Century, released in July, 2012, is an informative and insightful work, wherein the author brilliantly demonstrates how Indian diplomacy has become sprightly since
then and where it needs to focus in the world of the twenty-first century. He (tharoor.in) says:

Indian diplomacy is like the love making of an elephant: it is conducted at a very high level, accompanied by much bellowing and the results are not known for two years.

Tharoor explains why foreign policy matters to India focused on its own domestic transformation and surveys India’s major international relationships in detail, which evokes the Indian soft power and its global responsibilities. He analyses the workings of the ministry of external affairs, Parliament and public opinion on the shaping of policy and offers his thoughts on contemporary new grand strategy for the nation, arguing that, India must move beyond non-alignment to multi-alignment. The book offers a clear-eyed vision of India, now ready to assume new global responsibility in the contemporary world. The book mirrors the Indian diplomacy and suggests remedies to revise to cope up the global responsibilities. Commenting on the book, the author (tharoor.in) contends:

In my new book, *Pax Indica: India and the World of the Twenty-first Century*, I argue that our foreign policy must serve the interests of our domestic transformation. At the same time, much of what we are in the process of accomplishing at home – to pull our people out of poverty and to develop our nation – enables us to contribute to a better world. This is of value in itself, and it is our fundamental national interest.

Shashi Tharoor takes his vocation as a writer very seriously. Writing is a process of self-discovery for him. He admits in an interview with *The Asian Age* (November 15, 2005) that he has ‘a number of responsibilities’ which he seeks to express through his writings. He (tharoor.in) says:

I explore things that matter to me, like our Indian heritage, the forces that are making and unmaking India and also the dilemmas, problems and situations we are dealing with in our society and civilization.

Through his novels and non-fictional works, Tharoor has affirmed the Indian cultural identity by reflecting on its multiplicity and syncretism and broadened our understanding of the country’s great heritage. Rejecting the unitary narrative of Indian myth, history and culture, he has boldly asserted that, there is
more than one Indian culture and more importantly, more than, one view of Indian culture. Through his variegated writings, this diplomat-turned-writer has understood the cultural diversity of India and explored the themes of the country’s past and its relevance to the future. His three novels taken for the present study are the classics, in a sense; they incorporate the ‘Indo-nostalgic elements.’

We must understand the foundational sentiment that he expresses over again in his commentaries. In other words, to grasp Tharoor’s core argument we need to bear in mind his rhetorical stance when enunciating his vision of ‘India.’ He tries to be the person who speaks for India in reasoned and cultured tones, and he wants to persuade his readers about the inherent value in the idea of ‘India.’ In a recent *New York Times* (2009) article “Expounding Boundaries with a Colonial Legacy” he begins by saying:

As an Indian writer living in New York, I find myself constantly asked a question with which my American confreres never have to contend.

After a brief outburst about ideological problems in categories such as Indian writing in English, he (*New York Times*: 2009) answers his rhetorical question as:

This is the whole point about literature- that for a body of fiction to constitute a literature it must rise above its origins, its setting, even its language, to render accessible to a reader anywhere some insight into the human condition. Read my books and those of other Indian writers not because we’re Indian, not necessarily because you are interested in India, but because they are worth reading in and of themselves. And, dear readers, whoever you are, if you pick up one of my books, ask not for whom I write: I write for you.

‘Making and remaking of India’ appears and reappears in all the writings of Tharoor in diverse forms and styles. In the satirical reinvention of the *Mahabharata* in *The Great Indian Novel*, in the commercial world of Bombay Cinema in *Show Business*, full of hope and future, in the fifty years of India’s history in *India: From Midnight to the Millennium* and finally in *Riot*, in collision of history and culture resulting in brutal killings without reason. Tharoor is aware of the fact that, public life in India is full of contradictions and hopelessness. He dislikes communalism of any sort, which divides the society and places himself as
a Utopian. He feels that, India’s strength of pluralism and diversity will survive and the threatening forces will have to disappear. Tharoor calls it ‘an experiment in novelty as novel.’ He (*The Hindu*, Aug. 19, 2001) frankly admits:

> I write about India because I care about India. I have not wanted to write about other places in the same way. At the same time, I’d be foolish to write about India if I didn’t feel intensively that I was writing from a sense of roots and a sense of being anchored to this place and to the preoccupations of Indians.

The extraordinary character of Indian nationalism ignoring language, ethnicity and religion celebrate communality of major differences in his fiction and non-fiction. In the words of Michael Ignatieff (tharoor.in) “We are a land of belonging rather than of blood.” It is the main domain of Tharoor’s writings. To him, ‘history is vital, it’s fundamental.’ He also feels that ‘historical amnesia is an essential part of nation building that nations are those which have forgotten the price they have paid in the past for their unity.’ The feelings of communalism emerge like terrorism from ‘blind hatred of another’ and that in turn, is the product of three factors: “fear, rage and incomprehension” The reshaping of India is possible, if we are ready. He (*The Hindu*, September 30, 2001) says:

> ...to know each other better, learn to see ourselves as others see us, learn to recognize hatred and deal with its causes, learn to dispel fear and above all just learn about each other.

Tharoor further says that, our only effective answer to them must be to say that each one of us, whoever we are and whenever we are, have the right to live, to love, to hope, to dream and to aspire to a world in which everyone has that right. A world in which the scourge of terrorism is fought, but so also are the scourges of poverty, of famine, of illiteracy, of ill-health, of justice and of human insecurity. This is Tharoor’s chief principle for making and remaking of India that appears and reappears in his writings.

### 2.7 Tharoorian Indo-nostalgia:

India strikes many as maddening, chaotic, inefficient and seemingly unpurposeful as it muddles through the opening years of the twenty first century. In India, all avenues are open and everything is possible. In this connection, Tharoor (tharoor.in) quotes E.P. Thompson, the British historian as:
India is perhaps the most important country for the future of the world. All the convergent influences of the world run through this society...there is not a thought that is being thought in the West or East that is not active in some Indian mind.

An Indian mind has been shaped by remarkably diverse forces: ancient Hindu tradition, myth, and scripture, the impact of Islam and Christianity and two centuries of British colonial rule. The result is unique. Many observers have been astonished by India’s survival as a pluralist state. Pluralism is a reality that emerges from the very nature of the country. It is a choice made inevitable by India’s geography and reaffirmed by its history. One of the few generalisations that can safely be made about India is that nothing can be taken for granted about the country, not even its name: for the word ‘India’ comes from the river Indus, which flows in Pakistan. That anomaly is easily explained for what is today, Pakistan was part of India until the country was partitioned by the departing British in 1947. With diversity emerging from its geography and inscribed in its history, India was made for pluralist democracy. It is not surprising then, that the political life of modern India has been rather like traditional Indian music: the broad basic rules are firmly set, but within them one is free to improvise, unshackled by a written score. The music of India is the collective anthem of a hybrid civilisation. As Winston Churchill once barked (tharoor.in):

India is merely a geographical expression. It is no more a single country than the equator.

Churchill was rarely right about India but it is true that no other country in the world embraces the extraordinary mixture of ethnic groups, the profusion of mutually incomprehensible languages, the varieties of topography and climate, the diversity of religions and cultural practices and the range of levels of economic development that India does. And, yet India is more than the sum of its contradictions. It is a country held together in Nehru’s words “by strong but invisible threads...she is a myth and an idea.” He (tharoor.in) further wrote feminising India that:

It is a dream and a vision and yet very real, present and pervasive.
According to Tharoor, we are all minorities in India. A typical Indian stepping off a train, a Hindi-speaking Hindu male from the Gangetic plain state of Uttar Pradesh, might cherish the illusion that, he represents the ‘majority community’ to use an expression much favoured by the less industrious of our journalists. But, he does not. As a Hindu, he belongs to the faith adhered to by some eighty two per cent of the population, but a majority of the country does not speak Hindi, a majority does not hail from Uttar Pradesh; and if he was visiting, say Kerala, he would discover that a majority is not even male. Worse our archetypal UP Hindu has only to mingle with the polyglot, polychrome crowds thronging any of India’s major railway stations to realise how much of a minority he really is. Even his Hinduism is no guarantee of majorityhood, because his caste automatically places him in a minority as well: if he is a Brahmin, ninety per cent of his fellow Indians are not; if he is a Yadav, eighty per cent of Indians are not, and so on.

In the opinion of Tharoor, if we take the language, the constitution of India recognises twenty three languages today (one can see fourteen scripts on the rupee note) but in fact, there are thirty five Indian languages that are spoken by more than a million people with their own scripts, grammatical structures and cultural assumptions, not just dialects (if we were to count dialects within these languages, there are more than twenty two thousand). Each of the native speakers of these languages is in a linguistic minority, for none enjoys majority status in India. Ethnicity further complicates the notion of a major community. Most of the time, an Indian’s name immediately reveals where he is from and what his mother tongue is; when we introduce ourselves we are advertising our origins. Despite, some intermarriage at the elite levels in the cities, Indians still largely remain endogamous and a Bengali is easily distinguished from a Punjabi. The difference this reflects is often more apparent than the elements of commonality. A Karnataka Brahmin shares his Hindu faith with a Bihari Kurmi, but feels little identity with him in respect of appearance, dress, customs, tastes, language or political objectives. At the same time, a Tamil Hindu would feel that he has far more in common with a Tamil Christian or Tamil Muslim than with, say, a
Haryanvi Jat with whom he formally shares a religion. Harping on these differences, Tharoor (Ted Talk: 2009) exemplifies the definition of India as:

India is the nationalism of an idea, the idea of an ever-ever land emerging from an ancient civilization, united by shared history, but sustained above all, by pluralist democracy.

Tharoor contends that, Indian land imposes no narrow conformities 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. Our founding fathers wrote a constitution for a dream; we have given passports to our ideals. In India, we celebrate the commonality of major differences. So, the idea of India, to use Amartya Sen’s phrase, is of one land embracing many. It is the idea that a nation may endure differences of caste, creed, colour, culture, cuisine, conviction, costume and custom and still rally around a democratic consensus.

The pluralism of the country is acknowledged in the way India arranges its own affairs: all groups, faiths, tastes and ideologies survive and contend for their place in the sun. At a time when most developing countries opted for authoritarian models of government to promote nation building and to direct development, India chose to be a multiparty democracy. Despite many stresses and strains, including twenty-two months of autocratic rule during a ‘State of Emergency’ declared by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in 1975, a multiparty democracy—freewheeling, rumbustious, corrupt and inefficient but nonetheless flourishing India has remained. In the words of Shashi Tharoor (Interview: 1997):

The singular thing about India is that you can speak of it in the plural. There are, in the hackneyed phrase, many Indias. Everything exists in countless variants. If Americans can cite the national motto “E Pluribus Unum”, Indians can suggest “E Pluribus Pluribum”. There is no single standard, no fixed stereotype, no “one way”. We have created India; now all we need to do is to create Indians.

Tharoor’s preoccupation with India makes him restless to expose himself. For him, writing is a kind of self discovery and a master weapon to impose his Indo-nostalgia on the minds of not only the Indian readers but also the readers of the world. His conscious desire to explore Indian ethos and culture is a prime
vehicle of his literary experimentation. He ("What the Novel Means to me,"
Litterit: 1994) affirms:

Writing in English about India, I cannot but be aware of others who have done the same before me, others with a greater claim to the language but a lesser claim to the land. Their stories are not my stories, their heroes are not mine; and my fiction seeks to reclaim my country’s heritage for itself, to tell, in an Indian voice, a story of India.

His portrayal of Indianness is exceptional and unique which stands at the other end from the other writers of Indian ethnicity. He is not anxious of Indianness but more conscious of it. His literary experimentation with Indian condition and situation mirrors his indebted Indo-nostalgic involvement with his texts. He ("What the Novel Means to me," Litterit: 1994) affirms more overtly:

To me Indianness is not a matter of anxiety. I see cultural reassertion as a vital part of the enormous challenges confronting a country like India – as vital as development.

Moreover, his preoccupation with Indian culture is striking. His texts mirror the Indian ethos with all its multi-versed realities and coloured truths. His stories are the emblems of Indian culture. He assigns prime importance to culture in the development of the country. His basic discovery of Indian culture is to reveal India, his motherland, to the frontiers and horizons of the world. He ("What the Novel Means to me," Litterit: 1994) asserts:

Without culture, development becomes mere materialism, a subject for economists and planners rather than a matter of people.

2.8 Tharoor’s Notion of Secularism and Hinduism:

Secularism is established in India’s constitution, but many people ask why India should not, like many other Third World countries, find refuge in the assertion of its own religious identity. New stories have chronicled the rise in Indian politics of an intolerant and destructive ‘Hindutva’ movements that assaults India’s minorities, especially its Muslims that destroyed a well-known mosque and attacked on the Muslims in Gujarat, wherein the twenty first century men have been slaughtered because of the mark on a forehead or the absence of a foreskin. The votaries of this movement argue that, only Hindu’s are true Indians; Muslims
and Christians are in minority, because their Punyabhoomi, i.e. holy land, lies outside India.

Dictionaries define secularism as the absence of religion, but Indian secularism means a profusion of religions, none of which is privileged by the state. Secularism in India does not mean irreligiousness, which even avowedly atheist parties like the communists or the DMK have found unpopular among their voters; indeed, in Calcutta’s annual Durga Puja, the youth wings of the communist parties compete with each other to put up the most lavish Puja Pandals or pavilions to the Goddess Durga. It means, in Indian context, it is multi-religiousness. In Calcutta, where Tharoor lived during his high school years, he heard the Muezzin calling the Islamic faithful to prayer blended with the tinkling bells and chanted mantras at the Hindu Shiva temple nearby and the crackling loudspeakers outside the Sikh Gurudwara reciting verses from the Granth Sahib. Indians are always proud of their ‘Secularism’. In Indian context, secularism achieves a different meaning. Giving the definition of secularism, Tharoor (1997:52) contends:

...A profusion of religions, none of which was privileged by the state.

The notion that religion has no place in the public policy was readily accepted and implemented while adapting policies. The independent India was a secular country. Secularism was integral to the idea of nationalism. The innumerable cabinet ministers, Supreme Court justice and even presidents of India were the Muslims, after the partition. The Muslims have contributed a lot during both pre-independence and post-independence period. But after the Ramjanmbhoomi agitation, fundamentalist people no longer seemed to cherish that ethos of secularism. The communalisation of the political discourse provoked thoughts in the minds of the people, which were against the secular image of India. Then, the complaints were openly discussed. Particularly, the Muslims were pampered, they were disloyal, they could have their own personal laws, they were outbreeding, was evoking anger against this community. Now, in India, clearly visible is the change from ‘us’ to ‘them’. The Muslims contribution of India now, is an era bygone. The whole community faces the wrath. What troubles Tharoor is why all the community is forced to face the wrath when only a handful of them are
behaving in an unworthy manner. How can we forget what the Muslim community had done and is doing?

The irony is that India’s secular coexistence was paradoxically made possible by the fact that the overwhelming majority of Indians are Hindus. It is odd to consider that Hinduism is a religion without fundamentals: in many languages, for example, French and Persian languages, the word for ‘Indian’ is ‘Hindu.’ Originally, Hindu simply meant the people beyond the river Sindhu or Indus. But the Indus is now in Islamic Pakistan. To Tharoor, the word Hindu did not exist in any Indian languages till its use by foreigners gave Indians a term for self definition.

Hinduism is thus, according to Tharoor, the name others applied to the indigenous religion of India. (Sanatan Dharma) It embraces an eclectic range of doctrines and practices, from pantheism to agnosticism and from faith in reincarnation to belief in the caste system. Hinduism is a civilisation, not a creed that can be reduced to commandments. For Tharoor, Hinduism, as a part of religion, is an intensely personal matter. In his opinion, this is a religion which has no organised systems of temples, it is devoid of fundamentals and it does not have a single sacred book. Exploring his personal estimation, Tharoor (1997:55) comments:

...Hinduism is thus the name others applied to the indigenous religions of India. It embraces an eclectic range of doctrines and practice, from faith in reincarnation to belief in the caste system. But none of these constitute an obligatory credo for a Hindu; there are no compulsory dogmas.

He feels proud to call himself as a ‘believer Hindu’. It is not just because he was born in the religion but because of variety of reasons. He (1997:55-56) proclaims:

...one is cultural; as a Hindu I belong to a faith that expresses the ancient genius of my own people...above all, as a Hindu, I , belong to the only major religion in the world that does not claim to be the only true religion.

The ‘Hinduism’ that Tharoor prescribes is a different one than the existing one. He accepts the kind of ‘Hinduism’ which will never allow destroying the mosque. The ancient Hinduism can be prescribed in the credo ‘Sarva dharma
sambhava’ which means all the religions are equally worthy. The strong proponent of the ancient Hinduism, Swami Vivekananda praised and hailed it as the ‘liberal humanism’ dwelling in the hearts of Indians. Agreeing with the opinion of Vivekananda, he (2000:131) advocates:

...Vivekananda made no distinction between the actions of Hindus as a people (the granting of asylum for instance) and their actions as a religions community (tolerance of other faiths): for him the distinction was irrelevant because Hinduism was as much a civilization as a set of religious beliefs.

So, in his opinion, to consider oneself as a member of ‘majority’ in India would be a wrong conclusion; since, it is not possible for us to swear adherence about some particular beliefs. There are different ways of worshipping, even the names of the deities are numerous and there are no particular rituals or practices commonly followed by everyone, at everywhere. So, he advocates, as per the ‘Hindutva ideology’ to assimilate all. He quotes V. D. Sawarkar, who said that a Hindu is a person, who regards this land, from the Indus to the seas, as a holy land. Against this definition Tharoor (1997:116) raises a question which remains unanswered:

...what about those faiths originated outside India, and for whom India cannot therefore be their ‘holy’ land.

What troubles Tharoor is, how can a religion with such a generous attitude subscribe to fundamentalism? For, in such a religion, a temple is built in our own heart and mind without bricks and stones. Hindu religion teaches to respect all other religions. One is always proud of Hinduism for its diversity, openness and its religious freedom. Tharoor, who adopts and follows, is proud of these diverse principles. To him, every religion is equally valid and also, the beliefs and the ways of prayer. In an Indian way, everybody is supposed to search his own God, own truth and own way of salvation.

Tharoor remembers his childhood days, when his father used to pray, but he never forced him to join. He remembers that his every day from his childhood used to begin with a prayer in Sanskrit invoking Lord Ganesha: the God; with a great elephantine head, who is invoked in the morning by millions of Hindus. The
stories have given him the first lessons to the children about obedience to their parents. With reference to the influence with this God, Tharoor (1997:60) avers:

...I have since developed an even more personal connection to Ganesha...when recast the characters and episodes of the Mahabharata into the political satire on twentieth century Indian history. The Great Indian Novel, I had it dictated by a retired nationalist, Ved Vyas, to a secretary named Ganapathi, with a big nose and shrewd, intelligent eyes, which enters with elephantine tread, dragging an enormous trunk behind him. Such are the secular uses of Hindu divinity.

Tharoor has always dreamt of giving his twins an identity, which he himself is proud of. What worry him now, are the dominant changes in the ethos of the country and also the changes in the attitudes of Indian people. This was not when his generation grew, he still remembers, in a nostalgic sense, being brought up by rejecting communalism; nationalism was a spirit that dwelled in the minds of Indian even after partition. He (1997:51) advocates:

...in rejecting the case of Pakistan, Indian nationalism also rejected the very idea that religion should be determinant of nationhood. We never fell into the insidious trap of agreeing that, since partition had established a state for the Muslims, what remained was a state for the Hindus.

Besides a popular writer, he is, in fact, a very successful international civil servant. He sees himself as a human being with number of responses to the world, some of which, he manifests in his writing, some in UN work for refugees, in peace keeping, working for the UN Secretary General. For him, both writing and the UN are essential for his sanity, he (Interview: 1997) says:

...If I had given up either one, a part of my psyche would have withered on the vine. Sometimes I do wonder what I would have done if I had the luxury of writing full time, but I don’t allow myself any regrets.

He protests when an interviewer calls him ‘An intellectual’ and replies (Interview: 1997) diplomatically:

I have not really done enough academic work, I think, to qualify, to deserve that designation in the way you praised it.

When United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan, required a trusted associate to be the UN’s first Director of Communications for Special Projects in
1998, he elected Tharoor. When a vacancy occurred as the head of the UN Department of Public Information, the Secretary-General named Tharoor as interim head of the unit of seven hundred and thirty five members. When the Iraqi delegation arrived at New York headquarters in late February to discuss its sensitive world role, it was Tharoor who sat Annan’s side. He (Interview: 1997) has cleared his view about his post as:

Strategist: How do you view the importance of communications function to the UN?
Tharoor: I see communication as integrally linked to substantive work. It’s not just a question of people doing what they want and then have to sell it to the world. It’s that ‘needing to be accountable to the world’ that should help determine that we do the right thing, our communication’s philosophy has to be to tell the world what we are doing, truthfully and transparently and use communications to be accountable for the faith the world’s people have placed in us as an institution.

He thinks that the Indian experiment and the UN experiment have many things in common; they are both about people of different colours, appearances, cultures, costumes trying to work together for common objectives. As a visionary, he compares India with the UN. Indians work together though they do not speak the same language, do not eat the same kind of food, do not dress alike and do not even have the same colour of skin or whatever. We have this outstanding diversity in India and paradoxically, that is exactly, what the UN is all about. Tharoor says he is working with the UN all the time with people; who like Indians, eat, dress and speak in a different way. Somehow, working with diverse race, colour and the people, writing helped him to reclaim and reinvent a sense of Indianness; which he believes to be gratifying. He does not hesitate about the fact that India matters to him as he would like to matter to India; as a home of a rich diversity, of a rich pluralism, that manifest in both its social institutions and its political democracy. He wants to cherish and reveal to his readers both in the world and India. He (tharoor.in) says:

...I am very happy to do that because to me that articulates a vision that perhaps sometimes, sitting within India, people do not always see quite clearly for themselves because they might sometimes see the world but not the trees.
In his opinion, India is a land that can endure differences of caste, colour, culture, custom, costume and rally around a harmony. He thinks that India is sustained ultimately by a pluralist democracy that lets every Indian an equal stake in the future of the land they call it as ‘India’. Despite of enormous differences and indiscrimination, people work together and dream together. In his view, democracy is a way of maintaining diversity; since, it gives everyone an opportunity to play by the same rules and aim at the same objectives to find their own place in it. He (tharoor.in) avers:

...Indianness lies more in the soul of the country than its body and the soul of the country lies in its thought, aesthetics, philosophy, science and technology, its way of living in entirety and totality, in a word, it’s entire culture from the ancient times to the present day.

According to him, India still has a fair amount of power in the world, especially in diplomatic affairs. The problem may lie in the gap between the desires of some Indians and economic, military and geographical realities that border their desires. Our first concern being Indian should be to look inward to strengthen ourselves and provide our people with the essential requirements of their daily lives such as food, shelter and water. We should also give them an opportunity to develop their own potential, since an international recognition will come out of it. He (tharoor.in) thinks of India:

...think of steaming breakfast idlis and pungent coconut chutney, of lissome women in saris the colours of paradise, of the throngs of working men pouring from a brown and ochre train; I hear the roar of the white specked blue ocean lapping up at sandy beaches, the clear calm stillness of the snow peaks, the cacophony of the crowds at a cricket match; I image the sun shining of the marble and stone of our greatest monuments, the rain falling vigorous and life renewing upon the drying plains, the breeze stirring the green stalks of the paddy fields in my village...India shaped my mind and anchored my identity, influenced my beliefs and made me who I am. India matters immensely to me and in all my work, I would like to matter to India.

He (tharoor.in) further confidently confesses; constituting his indebted Indo-nostalgia:
...my works could not only have been written only by an Indian, but only by an Indian in English.

Tharoor shares that his dream for India is to keep improving the well-being of its citizens. He (tharoor.in) points out that, with seventy per cent of the population living under poverty, “There are still so many challenges to create decent lives for our people” and that “We can all help contribute to a better world”. In a style, both witty and profound, Tharoor’s works grapple with the nature of truth, love, the collision of cultures and the intersection of the political and personal. He raises profound questions that cut to the core of life and death: When people are able to conduct such terrible butchery of each other, how is it that they forget their essential humanity? He (tharoor.in) says:

Those who kill are rejecting their basic humanity and denying the humanity of the person they have killed. We need to understand the other, to look across the chasm of religion, nationality – whatever it is that divides us – to the humanity that unites us.

He (tharoor.in) continues:

All human beings basically want the same things in the world – they want to be able to live and love, to breathe, to eat, to feed their children, educate their families, have better opportunities to lead better lives tomorrow than yesterday. It becomes very difficult to kill or maim a person who is breathing the same air as you, seeing the same stars, dreaming the same dreams.

The author has employed stylistic techniques including multiple perspectives to impart empathy to his readers in his non-fiction. He (tharoor.in) explains:

Non-fiction appeals to the mind. It is analytical, an argument. Fiction, however, aims at the heart. When the reader relates to a character, empathy flows from that connection. Some of the most moving kind of feedback I’ve had has been precisely when readers have felt a connection.

The issue of empathy is one he’s explored both in his life and literature. As a UN peace-keeper in the former Yugoslavia, he saw how ‘History and religion divided people’. He (tharoor.in) says:

A lot of violence, terrorism, hatred comes from a failure to connect with the other, the demonisation of the other. You attack people as you don’t see them as being like yourself.
In his own life as an author and politician, Tharoor has effectively combined the written word with action and the details. He (tharoor.in) advises:

We can’t ever be perfect but we can work at perfecting ourselves and that applies to individuals, to relationships, families, countries.

Dr. Tharoor hopes the next generations will have the courage to make writing a vocation. He is currently writing a book on India’s place in the world, set for release on the first half of next year. Being a voracious reader, he publishes articles regularly on his own website. In his article recently published “Indian identity is forged in diversity. Every one of us is in a minority.” Tharoor (tharoor.in) asserts that:

India’s national identity has long been built on the slogan “unity in diversity”. The “Indian” comes in such varieties that a woman who is fair-skinned, sari-wearing and Italian-speaking, as Sonia Gandhi is, is not more foreign to my grandmother in Kerala than one who is “wheatish-complexioned”, wears a salwar kameez and speaks Urdu. Our nation absorbs both these types of people; both are equally “foreign” to some of us, equally Indian to us all.

His major concerns are: India’s terrible poverty and the rise of sectarian feeling. He writes elegantly and often colourfully, but when he blends his political interests with his personal experience, his portrait is literally vivid. He takes positions but they are often tinged with an unpleasant quality as if he is a candidate for office striving not to offend anybody while building a broad base of support for his views. His striking opinions that history – the world, the universe, human life and every institution under which we live – is in a constant state of evolution. The world and everything is being created and recreated.

2.9 His Views on Fiction:

The notion of fiction, for Tharoor, is different from other writers of the Indian ethos. He thinks that the principal characteristic of writing fiction is to explore oneself and at the same time to explore truth with realistic imagination. In his opinion, fiction needs some internal space in the writer’s mind to reinvent and recreate his fictional world. Though it seems to be fiction, it has always a real touch of facts of life. For him, fiction is the space wherein he explores India and
Indian facts of culture, politics, democracy and epics which contribute in the making of a nation on the map of the world. His conception of ‘novel’ encompasses development, dynamism, freedom of expression and creation, condition and a guarantee of culture. He emphatically asserts his notion of novel ("What the Novel Means to Me", Litterit: 1994) as:

...development implies dynamism; dynamism requires freedom, the freedom to create; creativity is both a condition and a guarantee of culture. My idea of the novel rests squarely on these convictions.

Moreover, as a novelist, he believes in instructing the readers by amusing them by satirising the follies of the people. Delight and instruction are the chief functions of Tharoorian literary art. Though his fiction centers on the stories that the country tells, at the same time these stories are about India. Exploring the principal function of a novelist, he ("What the Novel Means to Me", Litterit: 1994) asserts:

As a novelist, I believe in distracting in order to instruct – my novels are didactic ones masquerading as entertainments...I subscribe to Moliere’s credo “you have to entertain in order to edify.”