CHAPTER -III
SOCIAL IMAGE OF INDIA
The aim of this chapter is to examine the social image of India in the works of Shashi Tharoor.

Tharoor has looked at a distant past and tried to look at the present and future. He throws light on how the oldest civilization has traveled thousands of years from prosperity to the present state of decline and decay. The hope about the ‘present’ of our land in his works like *The Great Indian Novel* and *Riot* is so depressing that one is left thinking only of past or future. His *The Great Indian Novel* is the parody of ‘Mahabharata’. Tharoor says, “I shall tell of past, present and future, of existence and passing, of efflorescence and decay, of death and rebirth; of what is, of what was and of what should have been”. It tells the story of betrayed expectations. Many of the events and characters in this novel are recognizable from present day Indian politics. The whole novel is a satire on Indian society and politics. This is a country where Krishna, Rama, Buddha, Mahavira were born. This is the land where lord Rama waged a crusade to save Sita, his wife, but the paradox is this is the same land
which has a culture of burning widows’ alive. At the same time woman here is devoted and traditional.

The author feels that India is a nation of corrupt and incapable leaders. This country which was known for its Dharma and duty is lost in cheap politics which is haunting the society. In this country religion or ‘dharma’ was the code of conduct but in the present times it has become the cause of human misery and bloodshed. This religious chaos can be found in his another novel Riot. In this novel Tharoor talks about Hinduism, the biggest religion on the earth which took its birth in the oldest civilization that is Hindustan. He says that the Hindus who are more than eighty per cent in this country, are feeling insecure and their identity is at stake. This religion which is known for its tolerance has suddenly become intolerant. The question which troubles Tharoor is whether there is any real threat to Hinduism or the Hindus themselves have started feeling identity crisis.

Tharoor in both these works i.e. The Great Indian Novel and Riot remarkably explains that this present state of India is because of corrupt politicians and innocent and ignorant citizens. It is because of these politicians and ignorant people, he thinks that every thing in
India-culture, heritage, morality, duty, economics, socio-culture, politics, is crumbling down. Tharoor laments "it was not a land where dharma and duty have come to mean nothing; where religion is an excuse for conflict rather than a code of conduct; where piety, instead of marking wisdom, masks a crippling lack of imagination. It was not a land where brides are burned in kerosene-soaked kitchens because they have not brought enough dowry with them; where integrity and self-respect are for sale to the highest bidder; where men are pulled off buses and butchered because of the length of a forelock or the absence of a foreskin".2

It is remarkable that Tharoor has got extraordinary understanding and is so passionate to analyse the Indian social system. His observations of the developments in the field of economic, political and social upheavals are worth pondering. An expatriate, who is busy round the clock in the affairs of the world sitting in New York, writes about the Indian society with such an ease. As an insider who stays outside, he expresses his surprise about the fabrication of a society and its culture, the country which is pluralistic in every aspect and Tharoor believes "One way of making
pluralism work in practice as a force for progress rather than confrontation is to harness its diversity for common endeavors”.

This chapter aims to examine the caste system, class system, woman and religion in Indian society.

Tharoor, who essentially writes only about India and the Indianness, is deeply concerned about its political, social, economical and cultural conditions. His ‘home coming’ to Pallakad in vacations and having his education in cities like Bombay, Calcutta and Delhi – exposed him to the society at different levels of life which later became a rich fodder for his writings. His exposure to different classes of people in the childhood itself has sensitized the young mind of the author. He did not like his friend from lower caste to be neglected and humiliated by his ‘traditional’ family.

Right from his childhood he started seeing and feeling a strange monster in the society called caste system or caste discrimination. Caste system, Tharoor feels, is the biggest hurdle in the development of a country and this caste system prevails in the country right from its civilization.
The Glass system in the Indian society is the other inevitable hurdle which Tharoor speaks about. People living in urban India are usually of superior class because of the accessibility or advantage of education when compared to their brothers of rural India. This difference is again within all castes and communities. Education is the factor which divides people in this country and even after sixty years of Independence about sixty five crores of people toil on the land and are farmers and at the same this country has produced world’s highest number of Doctors and Engineers.

According to Shashi Tharoor Indian culture which is more than three thousand years old, has ever since then ill-treated woman. She is never treated as an equal to man. For instance, Tharoor writes woman “existed to serve the men, fetching and carrying and stitching and hurrying for them, eating only after they had fed the men first”. But at the same time he says she had a very prominent role in the Freedom movement of India and was a Prime Minister of the biggest democracy on the earth.
The author projects the Indian society which he finds diverse and where no two things are similar to each other in a vivid manner. In the author’s words “India is fundamentally a pluralist state; its pluralist emerges from its geography, is reflected in its history, and is confirmed by its ethnograph”. The author tells that in this country even potato is cooked in three hundred different ways.

Tharoor says “We are a land of traditions” and traditions and culture of such a kind that “what is here is nowhere else; what is not here is nowhere”. No two things are similar, let alone the people. If “Deccan is host to an India of darker shades, hotter food more rapid speech and rounded scripts; there is Dravidian pride and a rich overlay of Sanskritic high culture,” the same is not found in the North. North is entirely opposite of south. There the people are fair, they have different scripts, food is entirely different, and they claim to be the Aryans. If Kashmir is heaven on earth than Kerala is gods own country. “Not even its name, for the word India comes from the river Indus which flows in Pakistan”. Even Harappa and Mohenjodaro the seats of oldest civilization are in Pakistan.
Unlike Naipaul who finds Indians to be very primitive and uncivilized, Tharoor feels that every thing here has over grown. What Tharoor wants to point out is that India is not what Westerners or people like Naipaul see but as he writes in *The Great Indian Novel* it is the India which has witnessed civilization thousands of years back but is at the decaying stage. It seems a time has come for the completion of full circle – from savages to civilization and back. One of the striking feature of India is that it “has survived the Aryans, the Mughals, the British; it has taken from each language, art, food, learning – and grown with all of them”.10 It is pleasant to know that India has survived these and many more things but they have grown in their size. Stretched their feet more than anticipated. Anybody who has come here has settled here and no body came here without reason. They all knew that they could get here what they wanted. The Mughals came to loot wealth and became part and parcel of this land. The British came in search of spices and along with spices took all the wealth of this country. More over Tharoor finds they have even succeeded in dividing this country on communal basis.

Tharoor opines that Indians are not just the ‘Midnight children’ but they are the people who have gifted the world the ‘zero’ which is
an extremely important contribution. This “Indian zero is no empty shell. It reflects the perpetual intangibility of the eternal, it embodies the calm centre of the whirling tornado of life, it stands for the point where our verifiable values are transcended by the enigma of the void”.

For the same he adds saying “While some of our historical – scientific claims(to have discovered the secret of nuclear fission in the fourth century AD for instance) are justly challenged by western scholars, no one questions the fact that our ancestors were the first to conceive of the zero. Before the mathematicians, from the Arabs to the Chinese, left a blank space in their calculations; it took Indians to realize that even nothing can be something. Zero, shunya, bindu, whatever you call it, embodies the unchanging reality of nothingness”. The same zero has squeezed itself and has become a dot (.)Com and made this world a global village.

It’s not just the zero, there are unending list of things. Tharoor says ‘Mahabharata’ is one such epic which India has contributed to the world. The characters of this epic, walk even today in each corner of this earth. The Great Indian Novel is one such novel by Shashi Tharoor which is full of such characters. Tharoor in his novel The Great Indian Novel mentions that “to most foreigners who know
nothing of India the one Indian book they know anything about is the Kamasutra. To them, it is the great Indian Novelty. The Kamasutra may well be the only Indian book which has been read by more foreigners than Indians”.

This land which is called the ‘cradle of civilization’ today is experiencing turbulence both in time and space. This turbulence may be the result of survival of every possible thing of earth, here.

It is studied that India, which is geographically so different from one end to the other, is also more different from rural India to urban India. Nearly sixty five crores of people are farmers. These are uneducated, innocent and ignorant of many of the worldly things. They do not have basic amenities like safe drinking water, electricity, transportation and telecommunication. Tharoor says, even today “the kerosene lamps are lit and the mosquitoes emerge to prey on the unwary” in the villages of India and yet it produces maximum number of doctors and engineers in the world, and India Today (The Magazine) states that “fifty lakh is the average number of mobile phone connections added every month in India”.

Tharoor says “In India myths and legends are very slow to die”.16 Instead every child here, grows with myths and legends. The parent never fails to tell the stories of mythology to their children. The Superman lives in this country right from Vedic period. The legend of Rama and other stories is the fundamental education, which a child receives and grows up with them.

Tharoor is pained when a few Europeans always portray India as a land of beggars, dirt and other bad things and who “never quite managed to get the hand of what India’s all about”.17 For them “it is all of a piece with the stories of poverty and disease, of the widows of Benares, the caste system and the untouchables, poor people selling their blood or their kidneys, the slums of Calcutta or Bombay, brides being burned for not having brought enough dowry.”18 True India even today is dusty and caste ridden but this is the continued legacy of the British according to Tharoor.

Most of the places in India are economically backward. They lack many of the basic infrastructures like road, clean drinking water and Tharoor in his novel The Great Indian Novel says “Motihari was like so many other districts in India – large, dry, full of ragged human
eking out a living from land which had seen too many pitiful 
scratching on its unyielding surface – There was starvation in 
Motihari, not just because the land did not produce enough for its 
tillers to eat, but because it could not, under the colonialists laws, be 
entirely devoted to keeping them alive. Three tenths of every man’s 
land had to be consecrated to indigo, since the British, needed cash 
crops more than they needed wheat. This might not have been so bad 
had there been some profit to be had from it, but there was none. For 
the indigo had to be sold to British planters at a fixed price-fixed that 
is, by the buyer.

Ganga (a character from The Great Indian Novel) saw the 
situation with eyes that, for all his idealism, had too long been 
accustomed to the palace of Hastinapur. He saw men whose fatigue 
burrowed into their eyes and made hollows of their cheeks. He saw 
women dressed day after day in the same dirty sari because they did 
not possess a second one to change into while they washed the first. 
He saw children without food, books or toys, snot-nosed little 
creatures whose distended bellies mocked the emptiness within. And 
he went to the planters club and saw the English and Scots in their 
dinner jackets and ballroom gowns, their laughter tinkling through the
notes of the club piano as waiters bearing over laden trays circled their flower bedecked tables”.19

For the Britishers India was not only a place of exploitation but even worse than that, because Tharoor expresses it in his Riot

“God, what a dump.

The heat. The dust. The Flies. The shit. The crowd. You name it, Zalilgarh has it. Every horrific western cliche about India turns out to be true here”.20

Its not just Motihari or Zalilgarh that were exploited but every village and villager was experiencing the same agony, hardship and poverty because of the British.

Tharoor in his book The Great Indian Novel justifies that India was slowly changing. The change according to him was not all good because “the land of Rama, setting out on his glorious crusade against the abductors of his divinely pure wife Sita, the land where truth and honour and valour and dharma were worshipped as the cardinal principles of existence, is now a nation of weak willed compromisers
of leaders unable to lead, of rampant corruptions and endemic faithlessness".21

The fact is that the politicians have spoiled the atmosphere of the society to such an extent that it almost seems irreparable. They usually make huge promises before elections and end up in huge corruption after elections. Therefore a common fears that they have put India for sale. Even every government, every politician of India is involved in scams.

Shashi Tharoor however never looses hope. He believes "we are all in a state of continual disturbance, all stumbling and tripping and running and floating along from crisis to crises. And in the process, we are all making something of ourselves, building a life, a character, a tradition that emerges from and sustains us in each succeeding crisis. This is our dharma".22 It is very easy to escape from the realities blaming our karma and dharma. An average Indian irrespective of his religion and caste comfortably blames it on his destiny for the wrong he has experienced. This belief in karma and vastu never allows Indians to come out of the shell. Almost all of his important events in his whole life take place only after consulting an
astrologer. For this Tharoor is more critical when he says “an Indian without a horoscope is like an American without a credit card”.23 In each mohalla (street) of this country there are palmists, sadhus ready to guide the ‘future’ of a person and in the process only they are benefited because they loot the money and time of ignorant people.

With this brief introduction one can clearly know how the society, caste, class and religion, work in India. It is not easy, or almost impossible to detail every thing about “so simple a task in so complex a land”24 where “tea is always too sweet”25 as compared to any other country.

“Lights! Camera! Action!”26 and begins an unending saga of this nation, which goes on and on. “Lights! Camera! Action!” these are the words which every young Indian dreams of hearing for himself in “Bombay, a filmi capital of India”.27 ‘Bombay’ or ‘Mumbai’ as it is called by some Hindu Chauvinists of contemporary India, is, an India in itself. This is the place according to Tharoor where “everything in India is recycled, even dreams”.28 But before talking of Bombay or the tinsel world of Indian society it is necessary to know what happens in rural India. “Rural India, for centuries,
continued to remain a stagnant society. It is known that it remained stagnant because India is engulfed by many social problems like communal riots, corruption, population, illiteracy and so on. India, like "Zalilgarh is as bad as I feared. The heat radiates towards you in waves, as if some celestial oven is being opened and stoked in your face. The traffic is torrent, a raging rivers of vehicles and bodies in constant motion, streams of bicycles wending their way past their cows, their ribs showing through their dirty skin, carts creaking past drawn by skeletal buffaloes, dangerous buses blaring their horns as they rattle and blench their way across town. And everywhere people half dressed beggars with open sores clamoring for money, ash-smeared shadhus in saffron waist – cloths and matted hair, men in dhotis and men in pants and men in kurtha-pyjma, and the most strikingly the women, in multi coloured sari of cotton and nylon, glittering with golden bangles and silver anklets. Vendors hawk their wares on the street – savories served an dried palm leaves, peanuts in cone shaped packets made of old newspapers, sugarcane juice pressed in to grimy tumblers – as flies buzz around everything."
The situation is same in most of the villages of India and sometimes it is still worst. Poverty and illiteracy are the two major problems which stagnant Indian society.

In Show Business Tharoor attacks the hypocrisy of the Indian society. In the movies, he tells, a hero who is very poor changes his costumes for every verse and he is necessarily singing that song in Switzerland or Australia. He even exposes the film producers who try to project some harsh realities of life. But they do it to evade themselves from the taxes. India which is very poor is never presented as it is in Indian cinema. For instance “evil is personalized in the villain, rather than in the system which makes victims, not heroes, of us all. A false solution is found when the villain is vanquished, and the masses go home happy”.31

According to Tharoor “Films in India are truly the opiate of the people; by providing an outlet to their pent-up urges, the Bombay films make them forget the injustice of the oppressive, social order”.32 The Indian cinemas which are the only means of entertainment to the rural mass and “the Indian film industry is built on their ignorance and on their willing suspension of disbelief”.33 They start imitating
their screen heroes. There are number of instances where a temple is built in the name of their favourite heroine. This innocence of the people has become an easy entry for some of the actors in politics. The likes of NT Rama Rao and MGR from Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu respectively, went on to become the most successful, admired and adored Chief Ministers of their states. This is all because they played the role of mythological Gods or Crusader of the oppressed and people wanted them to be the same in the real life also. But today these heroes are replaced by beautiful heroines who are now there in Parliament because they are married as married woman has no place or little place in Indian cinema as a heroine and she also starts to “behave as if acting profession were incompatible with married respectability”.

Tharoor feels Women, do not enjoy equal freedom as their male counterpart in India. They are a suppressed lot. Those who have opened their wings or ‘loosened their thighs’ have found new heights, especially, in Indian cinema. They want to be a star overnight like Sunita, a character in Show Business. For instance “She is known to be willing to oblige the producer any time he wants a special favour”. “She wants to be the star of celluloid and to reach there her
only assets are those contained in her blouse”. For her sex is “some sort of divine gift to women, a commodity that was easy to offer, cost nothing to give and brought in great rewards. This not much work and it seems to make them so happy”.

Sex and nudity which was covered even in the bedroom has almost started working on the street. Woman who once laid down her life for her virginity now easily lays down to get her things done and she thinks “it’s so easy, and sometimes it’s even fun”.

The few crazy women some times fall prey in the evil hands. These “urban sophisticates know that ultimately all women and reducible to what you want out of them”.

Tharoor emphasis that the nudity on the screen should not be mistaken with the nudity off the screen because “nudity is a common place in our countryside of course, where many women cannot afford much to wear”.

Tharoor after emphasizing on these celluloid heroines talks of marriages in India. He compares the marriages of west and east.
“The west believes that love leads to marriages, which is why so many marriages in the west end when love dies. In India we know that marriage leads to love, which is why divorce is almost unknown here, and love lives on even when the marital partner dies, because it is rooted in something fundamental in our society as well as our psyche”.41 He sarcastically says “don’t confuse bedding well with wedding bell”.42

Tharoor compares Indian cinema and Hinduism when he says “Hinduism, as I have explained before, is agglomerative and eclectic; it embraces and absorbs the belief and practices of other faiths and rival movements. It coopts native dissenters – Budhha, Mahavira and Plagiarizes foreign heresies finding the protestant work ethic, for instance, in the karma – yoga of the Bhagavad Gita. The Hindi film is much the same; it borrows its formulae from Hollywood, its music from hirer pool and its plot lines from every bad film that Hong Kong has produced”.43

Anybody who tries to know about Hinduism and Indian cinema will end up in utter confusion, because they are very complicated, confusing and ready to adopt anything. For instance Ram Charan
Gupta, a character in *Riot*, blames Randy Diggs a foreigner. He says “you don’t understand. None of you do. But I am not surprised. India is large and country, Mr. Diggs, with our contradictions, paradoxes, inconsistencies all ours. How can you foreigners be expected to understand it? Where else do you have our mixture of ethnicities and castes, our profusion of mutually incomprehensible languages, a variety of geography and climate, our diversity of religions and cultural practices, our clamor of political parties, our ranges of economic development? How do you understand a country whose population is more than fifty per cent illiterate but which has produced the world’s largest pool of trained scientists and engineers? How do you cover the poverty and squalor of a land that led a Mughal emperor to declaim, if on earth there be paradise of bliss it is this, it is this?"44 The writer refers to Bahadur Shah Jafar, the last Mughal king.

The country, Tharoor believes which is so vast and contradicting is yet not easily divided. Time and again some foreigners have tried and once succeeded in dividing the country. Still, Tharoor is confident that as long as Indians are ready to accept pluralist approaches they can live happily. He knows “India is...
This communal violence has become a weapon (tool) to politician who uses it as his vote bank. India is witnessing number of Bomb blasts, now a day. But Tharoor is sure that “Bombs alone cannot destroy India, because Indians will pick their way through the rubble and carry on as they have done throughout history. But what can destroy India is a change in the spirit of its people, away from the pluralism and co-existence that has been our greatest strength”.46

The strength of Indians is that of unity at the time of crisis. Whatever region they come from, whatever religion they belong to but they are one and united. This land has given space to every possible faith and its people. So there are more Muslims in India than in Pakistan. But there are some foreign journalists who try to malign the image of India by projecting wrong things. Any stray incident also leads to communal tension because these foreign journalists write only of the “attacks on minorities in India”47 and these minorities are none other than the Muslims. But the question is that whether these Muslims are really the minorities. Tharoor’s opinion is that every one
in India is a minority within minority. It is clearly known that if only Hindus and Muslims of India are taken into account then Muslims become minority. But among Hindus, Brahmins are minority and if Hindi speaking people of the country are taken into consideration then non Hindi speaking people of south India become minorities.

This number game of minority and majority is not a problem.

As Tharoor puts it, and analyses the concept of Indianness in his book *Bookless in Baghdad*. "In the last fifty years not all Indians have learned to think of themselves as Indians, and to speak of an Indian cultural identity is really to subsume a number of identities, varying depending upon class, caste, region and language. But this variety is in itself integral to my idea of Indianness: the singular thing about India is that you can only speak of it in the plural. Given the extra ordinary mixture of ethnic groups, the profusion of mutually incomprehensible languages, the varieties of topography and climate, the diversity of religion and cultural practices and the range of levels of economic development that India embraces, India is fundamentally a pluralist state: its pluralism emerges from its geography, is reflected in its history and is confirmed by its ethnography. Indian culture is
therefore by definition a culture of multiplicities, a culture of differences”.\textsuperscript{48}

Tharoor firmly believes that India was never a country of the people of one faith and it can never be in the future. It has to accommodate every possible religion or faith since all the religions of the earth exist in India since ages.

When there is so much of diversity and difference in the vast country like India, it is but natural that it will take some time to come out of the slumber. Moreover for many western journalists India is a city of joy. For them poverty and nudity of this country is pornography. ‘Five Dollar smile’ a story by Tharoor explains in detail about an American journalist who has come to sell Indian poverty in America through his lens. The conversation below proves that-

“Get him away from that food sister, will you please? We want a hungry child, not a feeding one”.

“But I want to eat sister. Desperation pleading in his voices He knows what could happen if he was too late. There would be no food
left for him: it had happened before. And today was his favourite day, with crisp papadams in this Kanji gruel".49

The American journalist makes a point that “I’ve gotta be sure I’m selling the American public poverty and not retardation”.50

For the foreigners Indian poverty is fun and they want to capture it in their cameras. But for Tharoor it is a serious problem because the youth choose thefts, dacoity and even Naxalism. This is elaborated in his beautiful story called ‘The Temple Thief’ in his book The Five Dollar Smile and other Stories. In this story there is a boy who is hungry and poor. He has chosen to steal the lord himself to fill his belly. In the darkness he goes to the temple and steals the idol of Lord Shiva and some other Gods who are sitting there in that dark place. He is about to walk away but the Brahmin, the priest of that temple comes and the boy called Raghav is caught red handed. The Brahmin is not wild but very calm. He talks to the boy and tries to explain him about the culture and tradition of this country. He says, “In our religion there is much we tolerate – much the lord tolerates. It is written that he who does not have must, strive to attain success”.51 This philosophy is good to listen, but does it work on the
people who are hungry? The Boy keeps mum because his hunger is prolonged. The Brahmin continues to try to advice the boy and talks about theft in temple: “But at the expense of others – and not just of one person, but of the entire community which maintains, in its worship, this temple and all within it – that is cardinal sin”.52 “You, my son, have chosen to prostitute your religion to the deity of weath”.53

The young hungry boy who had come to steal idols leaves the temple, enlightened. The Brahmin had succeeded in changing the boy’s attitude to religion, faith and God. But “suffering drives men to many things”54 that’s what the Brahmin does. When poverty prevails religion fails. It was the Priest who was prostituting the religion, because when the boy walked out, the priest looked around and whisked away in the darkness with all the idols collected in a bag by the boy.

For Tharoor neither the boy nor the priest nor the religion is important. What matters to him is poverty in the country, where more than half of population is full time agriculturist and starves.
This starvation and poverty is the major hurdle for the growth of India. An old adage 'India is rich but Indians are poor' holds good even today. But today India is poor because Indians are socially ignorant and politically corrupt. Education can solve half of its problem followed by caste and its 'isms' which are destroying India. Tharoor feels “Education and economics, not caste, account for today’s inequalities and the stigma of caste is disappearing more rapidly in India cities than that of race in the United States”. It is hard to agree with Tharoor here because caste has in reality come from rural India and settled in urban India. The present day Mandal commission one and Mandal commission two for the reservation in the premier institutions of the country are the examples.

If this poverty prevails in society then crime rate will be shooting up. Tharoor even justifies the young boy and priest of 'The Temple Thief' stealing idols of temple as he says “crime was an economic necessity and one could not let one’s samples, religious or otherwise, interfere with one’s necessities. If God could not fill his belly by divine action, Raghav was surely justified in using God to fill his purse – and his belly”.
If India has to get rid of starvation, poverty and crime than it has to wake up. Every Indian should be socially and politically aware. For this Dr. B.R. Ambedkar way back in 1950 said, “Political tyranny is nothing compared to social tyranny and a reformer who defies society is more courageous man than a politician who defies government”.57

Caste system is one of the monsters which has no death in India. It is growing day by day. Caste system in India is the oldest and the worst curse. Scholars hold that this caste system is looked upon as an inevitable thing by Hindus. There is a theory that when Aryans, the fair skinned people invaded India and defeated the natives who were black, castes were formed. The victors claimed themselves as superior to the victims.

The Indian society allowed caste to stay and rule. Tharoor observes in India identity has become a trap, which he strongly dislikes. In his book India from Midnight to Millennium he discusses about the downtrodden and their difficulties at length.
Right from his childhood days he has witnessed casteism both in his native Pallakad (rural India) and Bombay (metro city of India). In Bombay, when as a school boy he was acting in a drama along with Rishi Kapoor a celebrity of Indian cinema; he was asked by Rishi Kapoor as to which caste he belonged? Even in his native place he saw Belatten his brother, never allowed him to mix with Charlis who was a dalit or downtrodden. Charlis was never allowed to come in his house and have food with him. He feels sorry when he says to his aunt.

“Charlis hasn’t eaten” I pointed out to the women folk.

“I know, child, but what can we do?’ Rani Valiamma asked “He can’t sit at our table or be fed on our plates even you know that’’.58

As Tharoor grew up he was all the time countering caste system. In his novel The Great Indian Novel also he discusses about caste system.
Even in days of Mahabharata, he finds caste played a vital role in Indian society. Karna and Eklavya are the people who were ill-treated as downtrodden. India has the History of caste system for more than three thousand years. The downtrodden or the ‘untouchables’ are still at bay in this country even though many of them have converted themselves to Christianity. For example like Velutha, the son of toddy tapper a converted Christian in God of Small Things a novel written by Arundhati Roy.

It is since ages Brahmins act as the agents of God and enjoy to the utmost. They were and are “traveling salesmen of salvation”.

In ancient days Brahmin was the only educated man. He acted according to his whims and fancies. All others including the kings and warriors were inferior to him. He was the most privileged. In olden days if he wished to stay in somebody’s house “he would be offered his host’s hospitality, his food, his bed and often, because they were a lot more understanding then, his daughter as well”. The Dalits of this country from time immemorable have lived a life worse than animals. They were humiliated to such an extent that Bhatnagar V.D. says, “men and women of the lowest castes were not allowed to wear clothing above the waist”. They were not even allowed to take
the water from a common well or to touch it as in case of Charlis, Tharoor’s friend, from his native village Pallakad.

At times both women and untouchables are socially doomed and discarded. Neither of them have ‘Locus stand’ in the society.

Tharoor, in his childhood, once had whisked with his dalit friend Charlis to his house and got halwa from his shop. Noticing this, his brother Balettan was so furious that he shouted to throw it saying “the dogs can have them”.62 This shows how Dalits in India were treated and as a young boy Tharoor had to throw the halwa as he had no other option. While throwing it, he says “It seemed to me they took an age to fall, their gelatinous surfaces clinging to the soft skin of my palms until the last possible moment. Then they were gone, fallen, into the dust”.63 Even Charlis was not allowed to eat along with Tharoor and his family but had to stand outside and watch. India even after fifty years of Independence has not got rid of this caste system.

Yet an attempt is often made as it is found here in the work of Tharoor who says “This ancient system of dividing society was
rejected by Mahatma Gandhi and the Indian nationalist movement as entrenching discrimination, but it has persisted in Indian society nonetheless.” But after Independence there is some change. Lot of care has been taken in framing the constitution which guarantees and safeguards the downtrodden. This change can be witnessed when Charlis, Tharoor’s friend, comes as an I.A.S. Officer to his own district. Even Balettan has changed and Charlis is invited to his house and they both have tea that too on the dining table in his house.

Things are not the same and all are not as lucky as Charlis in India. There are people like “Velutha, a son of a toddy tapper, acquires training in carpentry. But this technical expertise and his religious status as a converted Christian do not grant him immunity from victimization in a casteist society”. This, conversion of Dalits into other religions brings them no solace or help because caste in India is a stigma which comes with one’s birth and goes with his death.

India with all its rich culture, history and civilization has its own paradoxes. These paradoxes have become riddles which are not being solved but get riddled time and again. This is why Rathan
Rathod, a character in Arun Joshi's 'Apprentice', describes the Indian people as "a glorious monument in ruin".66

Tharoor, with all these glorious monuments in ruins finds a ray of hope in Charlis and Eklavya of *The Great Indian Novel* because "The modern Eklavya is not a simpleton".67

Even though this discrimination of caste prevails in India from ancient times, one wonders as Tharoor thinks "Caste like Hindu and Curry, is a word invented by outsiders to describe what Indians understand without precise definition".68 It becomes difficult to accept Tharoor's argument because caste hierarchy in India is as old as India itself. In the famous book of India called *Manusmriti*, by Manu there is nothing but description of Varna or caste.

The British, even if have not invented the word 'caste', they have at least left the legacy of dividing the people. This legacy is taken over by politicians. They are dividing the country on all possible grounds like caste, religion, region, language. So this makes one to helplessly agree with Naipaul who says "The crisis of India is
not only political or economical but something more. It is also about a psyche of every Indian.

Tharoor next talks of role of woman in the Indian society. In the novel Show Business he speaks about woman who in the days of Vedanta was called as ‘Prakriti’. “The universe is made from, and made up of, two simultaneous causes or principles – a spiritual cause called purusha, the male principle and a non-spiritual cause called prakriti, nature, seen as a female”. From the days of Vedanta this country has always suppressed woman. She is neither considered spiritual. The Indian woman is identified as shadow of her male counterpart. She is submissive, obedient and caring. She tells her husband “your world is mine, and I do not wish to see more of it than you do”. She believes it is “her duty to share the life of her husband, its joys and triumphs and sorrows”.

This shows the faith she has in her husband or the male counterpart. Some times it seems as if the man has made woman of this land to believe and be confined to it. This faith and sacrifice can be found only by the woman of this country and can never ever be imagined by a European woman. If a European woman misses her
food, it is to maintain her figure but if Indian woman misses it then it is for the sake of her husband and her children.

Woman, in India is not considered fit, for the work which is something big and serious, right from the days of Mahabharata. Even Tharoor himself asks Brahma for some one who could take his dictation of India. For instance when he asks Brahma, “Don’t talk to me of some weepy woman whose shorthand trips over her fingernails; give me a man, one of the best, somebody with the constitution and the brains to cope with what I have to offer”.

She was thought good for cooking, looking after family and reproducing children. “She is expected to subordinate her own needs to those of her family. She is supposed to bear her exploitation and suffering with willing fortitude”. The paradox of ancient woman was that man thought it was her duty to suffer and his right to torture her. Her life was nothing but a saga of sorrows and sufferings. Man did never allow her to lead a life of happiness nor in his death does, he. He was more horrifying after his death because woman was burnt alive along with her dead husband which was called ‘sati’. This was practiced for centuries in North India and woman would happily sit on the pyre along with her dead husband. From eighteenth century onwards,
many people like Raja Ram Mohan Roy started strong movements to stop this heinous custom. Later after some time “The British have put an end to our practice of burning widows on their husband’s funeral pyre”. Even though this was stopped long back, sometimes there are some stray incidents in India even today, where such ‘sati’ is practiced. This alone has not stopped the misery of woman. Her life is hell even as widow. It is the only country where a woman is virgin even when she is a widow. Like Aunt Mira (Mira masi) in Anita Desai’s Clear Light of day. This is because here girls are married as early as they are in cradles and their husbands die, before these girls attain maturity. Yet she cannot remarry and she is looked down upon by her in-laws. She is blamed as a cause of death of their son. Her head was clean shaved and she was supposed to wear white saree to identify herself as a widow.

As far as sexual abuse is concerned she has been a prey right from the Mahabharata days. The sages (Brahmins) of Mahabharata, times who were quite sure that they would never go to the houses of lower caste people because that would make them impure seduced the beautiful girl of the lower caste and ironically that would do no harm to his Brahmanism.
Not only Brahmins but every man thought likewise. Men married many times and had number of concubines but Tharoor in his The Great Indian Novel states that “the scriptures say a woman who gives herself to five men is unclean and one who sleeps with six is a whore”. The same scriptures do not describe anything about man. This shows that India from ages is a male dominating society. It seems that she is just a commodity and nothing more to the male dominating country, India.

Tharoor says even modern Indian woman is “reserved and not very communicative”. Woman is still uneducated and ignorant. Still they “serve their men first, eat what’s left, if they’re lucky and then submit unprotected to the heaving thrusts of their protectors, abusers, and masters. One more baby comes to wallow in misery with the rest”.

‘Virginity’ is the one thing, Tharoor feels, which is a taboo in India. Women in India can never be free in sex like their western counterparts. In the novel Riot, a conversation between V. Lakshman and Priscilla Hart proves that.
“Your wife when you met her – was she a virgin?”

“Does the Pop’s wife use birth control pills?”

I asked in mock disbelief. “Are you kidding? An Indian woman in an arranged marriage? Of course she was virgin. Forget sex, she hadn’t kissed a boy; she hadn’t even held hands with one. That’s how it is in India. That’s what’s expected.”

“Expected?”

“Expected”, I asserted firmly. “If she wasn’t virgin, no one would have married her. No decent woman from a good family would be anything else. I had surprised myself by my own vehemence”. Here also we find that it is the woman alone who is expected to be virgin and not man. In Riot V. Lakshman who talks philosophy of virginity of his wife before marriage is himself not a virgin at the time of marriage. He had lost it at the time of his college days as he had visited a prostitute to have firsthand experience before marriage.

The trend is changing and woman at least in urban India is becoming bold and educative. Kerala, Tharoor’s native land, is one such example where almost every girl is educated. She also dreams “as millions of her countrymen do in the cinema theatres of our nation. Except that they dream with their eyes open”.
With all these follies, tortures and agonies, Tharoor tells that “women have had different roles at different times. The same woman who is treated as a chattel in domestic matter is an essential and equal partner in rituals, religious sacrifices, the offering of homage to ancestors”.\textsuperscript{81}

“She knows where she is irreplaceable, in what she is indispensable and when she is irrelevant”.\textsuperscript{82}

Tharoor is worried because the Indian society which is undoubtedly the oldest society on the earth; which has witnessed many centuries passing through and many changes occurring in it, is in constant turbulence. “Fifty years after partition and independence, religion has again become a key determinant of political identity”.\textsuperscript{83}

The political identity determines and divides society. Riots are taking place because of identity crisis in India. It is not only between two communities, but also between two religions, two castes, two regions and two languages.
Tharoor says even after fifty years of Independence things have not changed much. For instance, “Coke had opened its first plant in India in 1950”\textsuperscript{84} but the people of this country are not assured of a glass of clean water a day, be it rural India or any metro city of this country. “One fire brand socialist, George Fernandes, demanded to know, “what kind of a country is India, where you get coke in cities but not clean drinking water in the villages?”\textsuperscript{85}

Not only George Fernandes, but no body can really understand what kind of country is this because “the entire point about Indian culture is that it embraces both, the burqa-clad Muslim woman and the Bombay model (and former Miss universe Runner’s up) who posed nude for a shoe advertisement”.\textsuperscript{86}

Tharoor concludes India is born and reborn hundreds of times, it will remain forever and nothing on earth can shake its cultural richness. The present India which is full of filth, immorality, dark, corrupt and decaying will be soon replaced by clean, fragrant aroma, full of light, justice, morality and Dharma. For this, he feels every one needs to be educated and the youth of free India should shoulder the challenges and take different responsibilities. They should be the
lawyers (Yudhister), soldiers (Bhim), journalists (Arjun), and
Bureaucrats (Nakul and Sahadev). He says “accept doubt and
diversity”.87 Let every one be free to practice his faith, worship in the
way he wants. Let him have his own code of conduct.
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