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Shashi Tharoor as a Gentleman Politician

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Abstract

Shashi Tharoor is an outstanding politician ranked the best among the present day leaders. His past UN career, his authoritative clout on every matter pertaining to India and his charismatic personality make him the most sought out among the political leaders of India. Entering the Indian political arena directly landing into the middle of the medley, he has been in the eye of many controversies that have projected him as a nonconformist and impractical outsider whose views and dreams for India are unrealistic. However, Shashi Tharoor has proved the cynics wrong and has manifested himself as an able leader and darling of his constituency who have chosen him two times consecutively. He is among the first generation of techsavvy new generation political leaders to make full use of the internet and reach his followers instantaneously and continuously, thus demonstrating an elected public servant's style of functioning could also be accountable and transparent. His stupendous academic achievements and outstanding literary works set him apart in the firmament of successful personalities of India holding a promise to the future of the country. Even in his short term political career, Shashi Tharoor has proved himself to be a gentleman politician who is sincere and honest in his commitment to his voters and strives his best to fulfill his promises. Such dedicated politicians who are ready to serve the nation selflessly are the need of the hour in today's India and Shashi Tharoor is a fine example of the proper role a true political leader can play in a disgraced democratic country like ours and serve as an instrument of change for bettering the miserable lives of millions of innocent trusting citizens of the country, at least in the coming century.

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“India matters to me and I would like to matter to India.”

- Shashi Tharoor

The 21st century India needs political leaders with a 21st century vision and Shashi Tharoor is indisputably at the forefront to fill this vacuum in today’s Indian political atmosphere. His degrees are certainly real and he has a long list of outstanding accomplishments to his credit. When he speaks, people listen; when he writes, people read. A multifaceted celebrity at 61, he was once an ordinary middle class boy, only too extraordinarily inclined towards the world of literature and wrote his first piece of work at the age of six and began publishing since the age of 10 and completed his doctorate at 22. In spite of the elitist image of a highflying icon, Shashi Tharoor, if truth be told, comes from a humble middleclass background and is one of us and obviously he has indeed worked very hard to be where he is today. He is neither a product of ivory tower existence nor typical dynastic political factory merchandise. Tharoorian grandeur today is the culmination of an extraordinary journey of an ordinary Indian with dazzling accomplishments to his credit. It is evident from his books that his love for his country is not just a publicity stunt. He has authored 17 books, most of them on India and explore our country’s different dimensions from the ancient to the modern and tries to lift the wilting spirit of the Indians to newer heights and lead them towards an ever-ever-land of an ancient civilization, the nucleus principle of which is pluralist democracy and the good of all the beings of all universe. There is something new about our country to discover on every page of his books. He does not fake patriotism. He does not whitewash his human shortcomings by dressing all in white, nor does he make vulgar remarks against women. He does not even indulge in hyper-oratory and indeed is very soft spoken. He comes prepared with notes and reference back up for his parliament speeches, socializes a lot in his constituency and makes all his work public. He is a humble human, suave, stylish, erudite, handsome, articulate, but he definitely is bereft of the dishonesty and the pomposity that we have come to accept in our leaders of today.

Shashi Tharoor is also one of the most magical orators of India, whose impeccable English, sophisticated manners and debonair body language have captivated millions of Indians. Recently, he was hugely admired for giving a nice dressing down to the British in Britain itself on the impact of colonialism in India and the argument that Britain owes reparations to its former colonies which sent a unprecedented patriotic shockwave throughout India. The speech also went viral on the media and as well became the material for his 17th book on India’s colonial times titled *An Era of Darkness*.

Shashi Tharoor was educated in India and the United States, completing a PhD in 1978 at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy and was also awarded an honorary D.Litt

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by the University of Puget and a Doctorate in History by the University of Bucharest. He was named *Global Leader of Tomorrow* in 1998 by the World Economic Forum in Davos. Among numerous awards include the Commonwealth Writers Prize and India's highest honour for overseas nationals, *the Pravasi Bharatiya Samman*. The King of Spain awarded him *the Encomienda de la Real Order Espanola de Carlos III* in 2012 and NDTV named him *New Age Politician of the Year*.

His career at the United Nations included key responsibilities in peacekeeping after the Cold War and serving as senior adviser to the Secretary-General in addition to his role as Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information. During his nearly three-decade long career at the United Nations, he served as a peacekeeper, refugee worker and administrator at the highest levels serving as Under-Secretary General of the organization. From 1981 until 1984, he was head of the UNHCR office in Singapore during the Boat People Crisis when he led the organization's rescue mission at sea and succeeded in resettling Vietnamese refugees. He was also instrumental in resolving the Polish and Acehnese refugee cases. Tharoor left UNHCR after a further stint at the UNHCR headquarters in Geneva, during which he became the first chairman of the staff. In 1989, he was appointed special assistant to the Under-Secretary General for Special Political Affairs, the unit that later became the Peacekeeping Operations Wing in New York. Until 1996, he led the team responsible for peacekeeping operations in the former Yugoslavia .

In 2006, he contested the election for Secretary General of UN but lost by two votes to Ban Ki Moon. He then retired from his UN career, though offered the second top most post at the UN. Shashi Tharoor also served on the Board of Overseers of the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, the Board of Trustees of the Aspen Institute and the Advisory Boards of the Indo-American Arts Council, the American India Foundation, the World Policy Journal, the Virtue Foundation and the human rights organization *Breakthrough*. A prominent human rights advocate, Tharoor served as International Adviser to the International Committee of the Red Cross in Geneva for the period 2008-2011. He was also a Fellow of the New York Institute of the Humanities and the Patron of the Dubai Modern School and serves on the Advisory Council of the Hague Institute for International Justice.

Even from his youth, he has been showered with innumerable awards; the Rajika Kripalani Young Journalist Award for the Best Indian Journalist; in 1990, Federation of Indian Publishers' Hindustan Times Literary Award for the Best Book of the Year and Commonwealth Writers' Prize for the Best Book of the Year in the Eurasian Region for *The Great Indian Novel*; in 1998, Excelsior Award for excellence in literature and in the same year named *Global Leader of Tomorrow* by the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland; in 2000, Honorary degree of Doctor of Letters in International Affairs from the University of Puget; in 2008, conferred with Doctorate Honoris Causa by the University of Bucharest, Romania; in 2009, Zakir Hussain Memorial *Pride of India Award*, GQ's

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Inspiration of the Year Award, Hakim Khan Sur Award for National Integration from the Maharana of Udaipur; in 2010, Sarva Deshiya Prathibha award from the Pazhassiraja Charitable Trust, Kozhikode, Institute for Integrated Learning in Management's *Distinguished Global Thinker Award*, *Digital Person of the Year* from Indian Digital Media Awards; in 2013, Sree Narayan Guru Global Secular and Peace Award and Person of the Year from PETA.

Also, Tharoor is an unquestionable authority on India, especially regarding its recent economic transformation and future prospects, globalization, freedom of the press, human rights, literacy, culture, foreign affairs, cricket and is a compelling and effective speaker, fluent in English, French, Malayalam and Hindi. He is the author of hundreds of articles and book reviews in a wide range of publications including the New York Times, Washington Post, Los Angeles Times, International Herald Tribune, TIME, Newsweek and The Times of India. He has served for two years as a contributing editor for Newsweek International. Shashi Tharoor also authors regular columns for the Indian Express, The Hindu, The Times of India, The Asian Age, Deccan Chronicle and Mail Today; he also writes regularly on ndtv.com and The Quint and publishes an internationally syndicated monthly column through Project Syndicate.

His first non-fiction book, *Reasons of State* (1981) is a study of Indian foreign-policy making, while his *India: From Midnight to the Millennium* (1997) is a highly praised analysis of contemporary India, which was even cited by the American President, Clinton, in his address to the Indian Parliament. *Kerala: God's Own Country* (2002) was in collaboration with the famous Indian artist MF Hussain dedicated to his home state. *Nehru: The Invention of India* (2003) is a biography of Pandit Nehru and an elucidation on his intellectual outlook and vision. *While Bookless in Baghdad* (2005) is a collection of literary essays, *The Elephant, the Tiger, and the Cellphone* (2007) is a compilation of essays about contemporary Indian politics, society and culture. *Shadows Across the Playing Field* (2009) is a survey of India-Pakistan cricket, while *Pax Indica* (2012) is a study of India's foreign relations and global strategy. *India: The Future is Now* (2013) is a compilation of essays by young parliamentarians in the country and *India Shastra* (2015) is a collection of his essays on India. His most recent book, *An Era of Darkness* (2016), is a historical account of British depredations in India and open condemnation of British colonialism.

His three novels are the classic *The Great Indian Novel* (1989), which has undergone 43 reprints in India and a compulsory textbook required reading in several courses on Postcolonial Literature. *Riot* (2001) is a deep analysis of Hindu-Muslim violence in contemporary India and *Show Business* (1992) received a front-page accolade in the New York Times Book Review and has since been made into a motion picture titled *Bollywood*. He has also authored a collection of short stories, *The Five Dollar Smile* (1990) and a coffee-

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table book with the photographer Ferrante Ferranti titled India (2008). Tharoor's books have also been translated into French, German, Italian, Polish, Romanian, Russian, Spanish as well as Bengali, Malayalam and Marathi.

On his return to India abandoning his UN career, though wooed by many political parties, Tharoor joined the Indian National Congress and contested the elections to the Lok Sabha in 2009 from Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala. His candidacy was opposed by the leaders of the Kerala branch of the Congress Party, who viewed him as an outsider suddenly parachuting into the higher cadre of the party. Tharoor, however, won by a comfortable margin thus silencing his opponents.

Shortly after the election, he was appointed the union minister of state in the Ministry of External Affairs in the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance government. His tenure in that office lasted less than a year, partly because of blogging on Twitter tweeting messages about his professional career and party matters. Those messages generated a series of controversies, notably one instance in which he was alleged to have ridiculed the economic austerity measures of the UPA government. He was also accused of having a questionable interest in a cricket team from the Kerala city of Kochi while he was a minister. He resigned from the ministry in April 2010.

Tharoor subsequently remained active in the Lok Sabha, during which time he served on committees focused on foreign affairs and defense. In October 2012, Tharoor received another appointment as Minister of Human Resources Development. In 2014, he had to step down as his party lost the elections but he retained his seat in the Lok Sabha. Between his stints as a government minister, he also served as Member-Convenor of the Parliamentary Forum on Disaster Management and as a member of the Standing Committee on External Affairs; the Consultative Committee on Defense, the Public Accounts Committee and the Joint Parliamentary Committee on Telecoms. He has participated prominently in many of the most important debates of the 15th Lok Sabha in India and in his current second term sits in the Opposition benches, also serving as the Chairman of the Standing Committee on External Affairs and a member of the Standing Committee on Rules.

Politically, Tharoor is a sworn supporter of the left-liberal camp. He believes in economic competition and government-encouraged small enterprises and that India's future depends on its ability to open up to the world. He is keen on freedom of the press and an ardent advocate of governmental transparency.

Shashi Tharoor is an unusual politician, spending half a month each month in Kerala and ensures he improves the lives of the people of his constituency. He was the first MP in the history of India to publish annual reports about his work and his expenses and urged other politicians to do likewise too. He set an example by submitting term reports to his constituents and to the press telling them what he had done for them in that term period. For example, a report about being able to bring more Central road funds to his constituency and

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completing urgent infrastructural requirements. He was able to break a 34-year old logjam on constructing a bypass for NH 47 that ran through his constituency and a number of new railway connections. He also was able to bring in the Hay Festival of Literature into Thiruvananthapuram and he also had a very ambitious scheme to ‘twin’ Thiruvananthapuram with Barcelona, which was thwarted by petty politics. He is continuously active in his constituency concentrating on burning issues like healthcare, drinking water, mental health and was also successful in retaining a government ayurvedic university that was about to be transferred out of his district. It is not only the big issues of his constituency that he is sincerely committed to but even small problems like a railway gate which was indispensable for the students to cross over at a local college catches his immediate attention and he takes it as a challenge to solve the problem within a short time by threatening, coaxing and cajoling the concerned officials. Though all the good things he does for his constituency do not get much publicity, people have seen him doing anything and everything he is expected to do as an MP. He is definitely seen as somebody who is devoted to his post and pays sincere attention to the problems of his constituency. Given the tangible results he has been able to accomplish in his home town, people proudly hail him as the best MP the constituency has ever had. In fact, one of the residents of his constituency is so enthralled that he has posted an online petition asking for Shashi Tharoor to be made the prime ministerial candidate from Congress, which already has more than 10000 signatures.

These crowning achievements on the one side, Shashi Tharoor has also been called “controversy’s child” for his characteristic propensity to get into too many catch 22 circumstances and many a foot in the mouth situations, for example his support for LGBT rights and Bill to amend Section 377, his Traditional Knowledge Bill, Presidential System for India etc. This is mainly because of his spontaneity, outspokenness and far too advanced knowledge than that is expected of him and too far ahead of what the present time requires. However, after so many years of international diplomatic service and adorning so many prestigious chairs around the world, it is only natural for a gentleman of his caliber to be magnanimous and float above the tide of the petty-minded commoners that he now finds himself in the Indian political arena and forced insidiously to continue in their company. Even his casual comments and most decent opinions are given an undesirable shade of meaning by his party colleagues and misinterpreted and blown out of proportion by the media.

There have been many such instances which have boomeranged on him and taught him a lesson or two in the art of dirty politics, but Shashi Tharoor is not a person to be gagged and he finally finds a way around to have his say. What is more amazing is the fact that while his supporters and fans worldwide are ready cut a finger for him, it is only the local media and the higher cadre of the party that have an axe to grind against him and do not hesitate to bear out the knives at the very first opportunity. However, Shashi Tharoor is a

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person who played Antony in *Cleopatra* in his teens in the Stephen years and is an expert in turning the tide against his unfair critics. Perhaps, his transparency, guilelessness, candid behavior and his daring attitude of shooting straight from the shoulder is what makes him what he is and defines his core personality.

Shashi Tharoor was also a pioneer in using the media as an instrument of social and political interaction with his followers. Till 2013, he was India's most followed politician on *Twitter*. He was the first Indian to reach 10,000 and 100,000 followers on the medium and currently has 4.2 million followers. He was first of the techno-savvy generation of politicians who realized the potential of social media in its very early stages and made full use of it, despite being criticized and condemned for it. As a junior minister, he was even chided by senior Congress leader SM Krishna for his *Twitter* commentary criticizing the policies of his own ministry. Following this episode, there were even calls from both within and outside the United Progressive Alliance government for Tharoor's ouster. In 2009, when *Twitter* was just around three years old and Indians still largely perceived social media interactions as a leisurely pursuit, Shashi Tharoor was already being referred to as Minister *Twitter*. Then only around 10% of the population had access to the internet, so no one thought social media users could actually cast decisive votes. However, a report by Internet and Mobile Association of India said that India's over 93 million Facebook users and 33 million *Twitter* users wielded a tremendous influence over poll results in 160 of India's 543 constituencies. Taking note of this unexpected trend, political parties now allocate a major portion of their advertisement budget to digital campaigns. During India's first social media election in 2014, 160 million of its 790 million eligible voters were first-timers aged between 18 and 24. Shortly after the national elections, the Aam Aadmi Party won the Delhi state assembly polls fuelled mainly by its online anti-corruption campaign.

However, now India is at a stage where mass rallies can be organized in a flash through *Twitter* and *Facebook* with an internet penetration touching 35% and there are more people to woo online as well. Today, while our PM Modi is the star with nearly 30 million *Twitter* followers, other ministries too are effectively using social media for official purposes also and reach out to people in the shortest time. Foreign minister Sushma Swaraj has even initiated action to rescue stranded people from Iraq and Yemen and located missing passports and persons following appeals on the media. At present it is notable that Modi government's social media use is becoming a way of bypassing the bureaucracy and reaching the public instantly. Today, hugely benefitted by Tharoor's example, all and sundry political leaders take ultimate pains to mark their presence on social media and they have come to realize that if they want to be taken seriously and make an impact among the public, it is fundamental they communicate through the internet.

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Tharoor's tweets using idioms of the English language have created a storm in the teacup and been deliberately misinterpreted giving his statements an ugly shade of meaning. The first controversy was soon after he was elected and Congress had declared an austerity drive. In response to a question on a blog on whether he would fly by economy class, he had innocently tweeted positively saying: "Absolutely, in cattle class out of solidarity with our holy cows". This tweet had caused an uproar for likening the common traveler to cattle and for insulting insinuations enraging the high command. The cattle class comment saw him being pushed out of UPA cabinet and some members of the Congress had publicly denounced and distanced themselves from him. Tharoor had at another time commented that Indian politicians lacked in sense of humor, which was not favorably received either. He was also criticized because he stayed in luxurious hotels as the government had not provided him appropriate accommodation. There was an occasion in the parliament when there was a discussion on the topic of organ donation and Tharoor had announced that he had already pledged his organs and asked the Speaker, Sumitra Mahajan, if she might encourage the members to set an example by pledging to donate their organs on a voluntary basis. However, she had not only avoided answering the question directly but waived it aside too. Also, he is still in the center of a raging controversy on the death of his second of the three wives and his detractors are just waiting with crossed fingers for him to be jailed forever without bail

In the present hostile and cutthroat political climate in India, the opposition party seems to be there just to stage walk-outs, boycott half the sessions, or disrupt the dignified legislation process and compete in mike and chair throwing contests. Sadly, our politicians have reduced our democracy to one of disgrace for their own ulterior motives. India is a parliamentary democracy and policy making is a prerogative of the elected government but most of all the opposition is equally important, which apart from the judiciary, is the only other check on the ruling government. The purpose of an elected government and opposition is to have opposites come to a consensus on issues of national importance. Democracy not only empowers the ruling government to make a policy, but also authorizes the opposition to criticize and oppose it. We often forget that the opposition, in spite of being out of power, is an elected body as well. It is paramount in a democracy that government and opposition bridge the divide between them and pay more caution in times such as these when the country must stand united against foreign acts of aggression. A fragmented opposition, where the opposition, the government, army and intelligence is blaming each other would only prove an advantage to the enemies in the neighborhood.

In spite the venomous atmosphere prevailing between the ruling and opposition parties today, it is heartening to see Tharoor and PM Modi acting cordially with each other and exchanging niceties now and then. Despite the shameless mud-slinging and toxic environment we find between the rivals in Indian politics today, Shashi Tharoor is a rare

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example of gentlemanliness and courteous behavior in thought and deed. Actually, it was PM Narendra Modi, then newly come to power, who had first praised Tharoor in person for his Oxford speech and commented that his speech very aptly expressed the true feelings of patriotic Indians and that he had said the right things at the right place. In reciprocation, Tharoor had wished PM Modi on his birthday, praised a few of his good works, accepted his invitation to join the Clean India drive, hailed his yoga campaign and spoken openly saying that Modi left an indelible impact on the countries he had visited by his magnetic personality. These positive comments in the interest of the general progress of the country were viewed suspiciously by the party high command and consequently he lost his job in the foreign ministry and once again as the spokesman of the party. However, it should be noted that while he went out of his way to wish PM Narendra Modi on his birthday and lauded him for his various achievements, he did not hesitate to accuse the PM of failing to address the increasing communal violence since he assumed power. Tharoor had without mincing words said that the PM's silence insidiously encouraged some outrageous statements and ideas by his ministers and not saying the right thing at the right time was something Modi could be held accountable for.

Shashi Tharoor has many times been called a misfit in politics and some have even branded him as too sophisticated for Indian political environment because of his ultramodern futuristic viewpoints. He has also been at the receiving end of a number of controversies in a country where sentiments are hurt too easily and loyalties questioned too often. Nevertheless, we need exemplary leaders like Tharoor who are progressive and well-educated, even if sitting in the opposition. We are certainly in need of good capable leaders like Tharoor and a hundred more like him will definitely make the future of Indian politics and administration the best in the world and uphold the pride and true values of the largest democratic country. Though called many times Charming Mr Change and deemed the most charismatic politician to represent India, Shashi Tharoor is also called a nonconformist rebel in Indian politics. Paratrooping into Indian politics straight from his UN career, he could be an anachronism in today's politics crowded with mediocrity but that is the precise reason to recognize the fact that he is rare leadership material of a higher caliber than the present day politicians and is capable of rejuvenating the country's politics in the 21st century.

Controversies apart, Shashi Tharoor unquestionably ranks among India's most knowledgeable think tanks and at the same time has proven to be a sincere and honest politician. One of the most refined men to ever grace Indian politics, Shashi Tharoor is a broadminded patriot leader who argues for civilized society and democratic values. He is a one man army of a great historian, author, parliamentarian, orator, and statesman and a humble, versatile, handsome and comely politician. Absolutely enthralling and factually compelling, he does have the honesty, sincerity, rationale, charisma, wisdom, knowledge, shrewdness and humility to lead a nation. Tharoor is undoubtedly an able administrator with

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the very best academic qualifications and international diplomacy to his credit. He is absolutely practical and rational in his approach to various problems faced by India both internally and in the international turf. He is an artist in the art of public speaking and an adept at presenting irrefutable facts and figures. Indeed, India is in dire need of such leaders to take her forward in the 21st century.

Neither a career politician nor a political scion himself, Shashi Tharoor's political elevation should set an example to many Indians who shy away from politics as a career because of the belief that the scope for professionals in politics is limited, but on the contrary Indian politics would benefit from infusion of women, the middleclass and the professionals. Shashi Tharoor himself strongly advocates that selfless nationalistic middleclass members are best placed for improvement of Indian politics. He is confident that an initiative like the All India Professionals' Congress, of which he is presently the President, will give an opportunity to the intellectuals and nationalistic personalities to channelize their imagination, energies, professional skills and ideas to help meet their aspirations for and in India. Such an enterprise will ensure that more professionals with skills and qualifications come into politics to uphold the values of hard work and aspirations of the middleclass for itself and for the idea of a soft power India in the 21st century. It is an obvious fact that India's educated tax-paying professionals are the ones who are acutely aware of the need for sound and stable governance. Shashi Tharoor cautions that abandonment of political responsibility by the Indian educated professional classes is fatal for the destiny of the nation. Shashi Tharoor recommends that in India, like in most western democracies, politics should be a nonprofit middle-class pursuit and only when professionals join politics and work for the nation selflessly, democracy would find its real meaning and the democratic system in India would find its salvation. Tharoor has also been campaigning for a re-look at India's electoral and governance system. Tharoor has many times expressed his opinion that the present electoral system has no accountability and is not democratic enough and by the tide of things happening in the country, we can discern that we are slowly moving towards a highly digitized transparent polling system and modernized structure of administration in the future. His experienced counsel and emphatic recommendation for the youth of India today is brought out in these words: "My message to young middle class Indians who actually have principles and ideals is this: When you think about the future of India, think also of getting involved in politics".

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