

Democracy in decline: Backlash against globalisation and the rise of new nationalism

Dr Shashi Tharoor is a former UN under-secretary-general and currently a serving Member of Parliament, Lok Sabha in India. He also serves as Chairman of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Information Technology and All India Professionals Congress. He is the author of several books, including "India Shastra: Reflections on the Nation in our Time" and "An Era of Darkness: The British Empire in India". In an interview with Eresh Omar Jamal and Mohammad Al-Masum Molla of The Daily Star, Dr Tharoor talks about Indian and world politics, ideas behind the nationhood of Pakistan and India, the situation in Kashmir, and the current state of India-Bangladesh relationship.

You have been a big critic of some of the rightist tendencies of the BJP government. Why have rightist parties around the world become so popular in recent years?

There are basically two aspects of this. One, there has been a backlash against globalisation. In some developed countries, people have felt that their jobs have been exported to Shanghai and they, therefore, can no longer look forward to fulfilling their dreams. In America, every generation thought they would have bigger houses, bigger cars and higher salaries than their parents and suddenly there is now a generation that can't be sure of that. They can't afford it because they don't have that kind of guaranteed jobs and guaranteed circumstances, so there is a backlash against that.

In parallel, there is a separate backlash, against cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism. A cultural backlash which is pulling ahead right now in many of the same countries, but also in other countries in the name of a more rooted, authentic national identity. In places like America where Trump is saying "make America great again", it's not only an economic argument; it also means "make America white again" as a subtext. And similarly, Brexit is a revolt against carrying too many foreign languages from Eastern Europe and so on, on to the streets of England. If you look at the rise of Madame Le Pen in France, Orban in Hungary and many other leaders in western countries, you see the same phenomenon.

But if you look at Erdogan and Modi, they are anti-cosmopolitanism, they are claiming to be more authentic nationalists—in Turkey, it is more religiously towards Islam, in India it is a message of Hindutva. So they are anti-cosmopolitan, but they don't want to be a part of the economic backlash. They are not rejecting the "Davos man"—they want to be the Davos man.

That's why I am saying the two backlashes don't always go together. In many western countries, they do go together. In many non-western countries in particular, one or the other exists but not both. All these phenomena and their emphasis will vary depending on local circumstances because the politics of each country will naturally have its own influence. So when you look at the different leaders that have risen, the background story may be coloured very much by local factors, political events and histories.

But my criticism of Modi isn't only because of that. There, I have a fundamental problem that I argue—that the entire difference in the national settlement was between those who felt that religion should be a determinant of nationhood, which was the idea of Pakistan, and those who said that religion does not determine our nationhood, which was the idea of India. So on the one hand, you had Gandhi, Nehru, Maulana Azad and everyone who were saying that our freedom struggle includes everyone, and on the other hand, you had the Muslim League saying that our struggle is only for Muslims. For Modi's people to argue that India should be a Hindu *rastra*, would ultimately be the biggest victory for Mohammed Ali Jinnah in India, because we never granted him that victory. We always rejected his idea and lived for 70 years in a multi-ethnic, completely accepting India. That is what is under threat. And therefore, in my mind, it is very important to stand up and speak for that idea, the original idea of India.

I also have strong criticisms of this government's economic policies, the disaster of demonetisation whose third

anniversary was this month, the shrinking space for dissent, the increasing intolerance coming out of the government, concerns about more electronic eavesdropping. I chair the IT committee and there are a lot of worries about how technology could be misused, etc.

Are liberal forces and their neoliberal policies around the world somewhat to blame for the rise of the right?

I am not sure you could just blame any one side in the debate. Centrism is in retreat. So the kind of policies espoused by the Clintons, Tony Blair, Gordon Brown, that is a little bit of capitalism and a little bit of welfare-ism, which is the kind of policy that we in the Congress have identified with in recent years in Delhi—that kind of thing is in the retreat and people seem to want one extreme or the other.

So if you look at America, which is unlikely to have an environment like this, you see Trumpists on the one hand and supporters of Bernie Sanders, Elizabeth Warren and other de-facto socialists on the other. Sanders is even willing to use the word "socialism" which in America used to be considered a bad word. The fact that these things are happening shows that there is an increasing polarisation of political opinion.

are realising that the message of Gandhi is deeply respected around the world and therefore for them to denounce him would actually make them look foolish before the entire world.

Mr Modi has a very keen eye for India's soft power in the world. But it's all symbol without substance. Mahatma Gandhi's "glasses" are used for the "clean India" campaign, but his values, such as the values of looking beyond religious divisions to what unites us, are completely being abandoned in the politics and the actions of the ruling party and its supporters.

Then why do many people support these forces? Has Gandhi's message become less popular in India?

No, Gandhi's message has not become less popular. I think much more contemporary issues have driven the vote.

The whole Gandhi message they have been sending is on a fairly superficial and external level. The substantive issues have certainly been focused on Hindu majoritarianism, with a strong emphasis on national security, Pakistani terrorism and all of that—and on the fact that we have a strong government and that kind of a message, and on some level of micro development projects.

We thought, for example in my party, that

I think it is not the decision but the way it was done that is of concern and that's what I said in parliament. The way it was done with no consideration for the political leaders of Kashmir—the arrest and locking up of leaders, activists and so on—has created a situation that has delegitimised the democratic space.

By shutting down the state, cutting telephone connections and forbidding political rallies and so on, you have created an illusory appearance of peace and calm. But in practice, if you shut off the democratic space, into that vacuum will come the undemocratic actors. You are giving encouragement to terrorists. They will be able to turn to that because they will see no other means of protesting or voting for anyone else. So I think in many ways that was a big mistake. But there is no doubt that it is a very popular decision in the rest of India.

Freedom of speech around the world seems to be in danger. Why are governments clamping down on it? Is it because of fear led by the belief that change is possible?

Freedom of speech is indispensable. I once said 20-odd years ago when I was in the UN and it still pops up as a quote here and there, that freedom of speech is the mortar which binds together the waves of

criticised by the few. Why are you trying to stifle us?

The only plausible answer is an obsession of self-image. I think autocrats, they like to read newspapers, they like to see themselves portrayed well. So when they are being attacked in newspapers they take it personally. I think that's the difference.

I don't really think that attacks in the newspapers will bring down the government. Maybe television still can because our oral culture is still much stronger. But the fact is that at this stage, autocratic governments don't think to hesitate, they just go after everybody on the same basis.

How do you assess the current Bangladesh-India relationship?

I think that the relationship is actually better than it has been for a very long time. I was chairman of the foreign affairs committee in the previous parliament and in that capacity, it was my pleasant duty to steer through the committee the constitutional amendment that settled the land disputes for various enclaves, by giving Bangladesh more land than we ended up with. But it did not matter because we felt the relationship was important and worthwhile. It was the right thing to do. It was one example of constructive development.

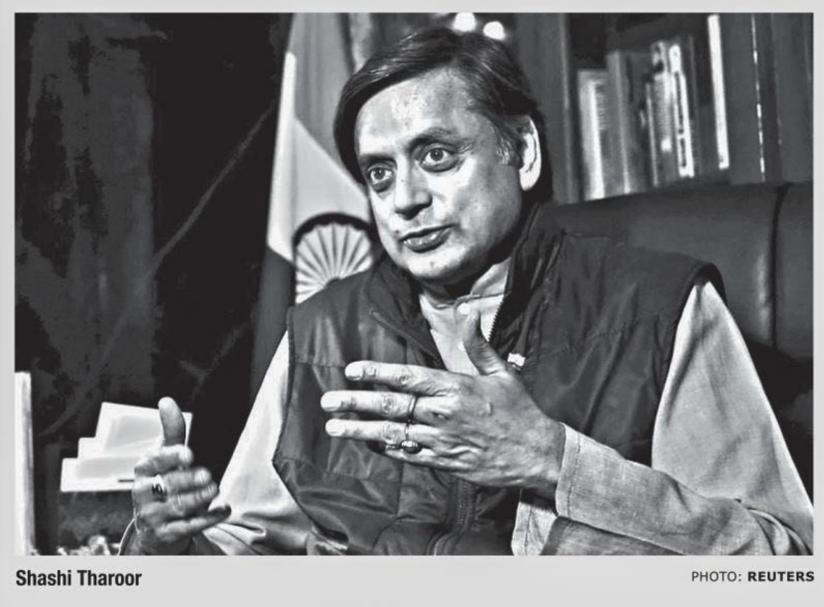
The second one is the land route. For example, the Indian High Commissioner was telling me that my friend, the chief minister of Meghalaya, was in Dhaka on Thursday. He came by car and is going back by car. He is driving back through Mymensingh and so on to Meghalaya. Now what's interesting about that is, it used to be possible before 1947, it has not been possible since 1965, and it is possible now. So that's also a very good thing.

Thirdly, you are seeing a lot more mutual give-and-take when it comes to cultural interactions. Even issues of some tension in the past, the Teesta river water agreement, even the disagreements are being discussed amicably and that is very healthy.

The gestures by Bangladesh in showing respect for Indian concerns about terrorism, for example, have been widely appreciated across the political divide. When Bangladesh takes action against terrorists who are seeking refuge in Bangladesh and hands them over to the Indian authorities, we feel this is a true friend.

If your neighbour is offering safe haven to people who want to destroy your country or even a part of your country, that is not something that you can ignore and in the days of East Pakistan, that used to happen a lot. Even after independence and liberation here, there have been some incidents which I won't go into details about involving other governments. But in recent years, we have seen a tremendous mutual respect and this is definitely there in areas of security cooperation.

I feel very upbeat about the Indo-Bangla relations for all of these reasons and I think that as long as this continues, regardless of who is in power on either side, the future ought to be very good. I think there are more and more areas of commonality and I am looking forward to seeing more sub-regional free trade developing. Obviously, we are more protectionist than the other Southeast Asian countries. And BBIN, the Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal arrangement has not totally taken off and it created some problems in some areas. But in other areas, the potential is there, and I hope we work hard and strengthen that also.



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PHOTO: REUTERS

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The Indian prime minister has said that his government believes in the ideals of Mahatma Gandhi, but others say BJP's policies are at odds with them. How do you reconcile the two?

The Hindutva movement from which Mr Modi's political ideology is derived has historically been, during Gandhiji's lifetime even, among his biggest critics. And the critique was quite fundamental. They disagreed with Gandhi on substance and on tactics such as non-violence. As far as the transcendent course for which he gave his life—which was Hindu-Muslim unity—was concerned, they were completely opposed to it.

And so that entire RSS Hindutva movement grew up condemning Gandhi, teaching negative things about him and being quite hostile to his legacy. It is a matter of some surprise that today they are hailing Gandhi—but the answer is also partially maturity on their part. They

the economy was doing so badly that people voting for them because of their own wallets are not going to vote for this party again. But they did, surprisingly.

We looked and saw that unemployment was at a 45-year high. Agriculture is in such distress that farmers are committing suicide in record numbers. Exports are down, industrial production is down, automobile sector is laying off thousands of people. All sorts of problems are there. But, in the villages of northern India, toilets have been built—they say a million toilets. The counterargument is that there is no running water in 60 percent of those toilets. These are the kinds of issues we have to point out. We can't say Modi has done nothing, but many of the people that voted for him have done so because of these small factors.

What is your opinion about the government of India revoking the special status granted to Jammu and Kashmir?

democracy. But it is also an open window embedded in those bricks. And that's my passionate conviction.

Having said that, it's also true that in societies like ours, it affects the minority of the electorate. Freedom of speech and freedom of the press go to that segment of the population. In both India and Bangladesh, it's probably true that the majority of the population is not part of that.

We are 1.3 billion people. The largest circulation newspaper would not be more than 200 million, maybe less. So, we are living in a country where only a minority still pursues that freedom. I don't know the figures of Bangladesh but it must be quite similar.

There are two issues here. The first is, are we then only concerned about the interests of the elite as autocrats tend to imply. But equally, we can turn around and say to the autocrats, if what you are doing is popular with the others, how does it matter if you are

QUOTABLE Quote



ISAAC NEWTON
(25 December 1642 – 20 March 1726/27)
English mathematician, physicist, astronomer, theologian, and author.

If I have ever made any valuable discoveries, it has been owing more to patient attention, than to any other talent.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Snatch
- 5 Mating game
- 10 Yoga position
- 12 Coniferous tree
- 13 "... - man who wasn't there"
- 14 Knight wear
- 15 Pot brew
- 16 Halloween costume choice
- 18 Halloween costume choice
- 20 Original
- 21 Olden days
- 23 Hosp. sections
- 24 Birth place
- 26 Overlook
- 28 Shoe hue
- 29 Easy targets
- 31 Place of refuge
- 32 Halloween costume choice
- 36 Halloween costume choice
- 39 Blend
- 40 Wed in secret
- 41 Chosen few
- 43 Attack
- 44 Sub system
- 45 Lab work
- 46 Custom

DOWN

- 1 Extravagant showiness
- 2 Lover of drama
- 3 First-string players
- 4 Except
- 5 Chowder bit
- 6 Plucked instru-
- 7 Royal furs
- 8 Game officials
- 9 Moles' cousins
- 11 Rescuers
- 17 Oxygen: Prefix
- 19 Tourney pass
- 22 Dominions
- 24 One released early
- 25 Tangled
- 27 Syr. neighbor
- 28 Least wild
- 30 King Kong, e.g.
- 33 - acids
- 34 Moon of Saturn
- 35 Use, as force
- 37 Set eyes on
- 38 Addition column
- 42 Near the ground

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