crippled Bud Ripplemayor for Professor Taylor, she actually has just
deserted a dependent man for a man she can depend on. Besides, is
ignoring the minority and other related problems of America and
merging with the white mainstream, the final redemption of an Indian
woman from a village in Punjab?

While one does not advocate what is sometimes described as South
Asian exclusionism, it is clear that there are problems with women’s
life and writing that are peculiar to South Asia, and in The Law of the
Threshold: Women Writers in Indian English. Malashri Lal, has made very
fine choices to analyse and illustrate some of those problems. And she
writes fluent prose that reads well.

BARAN REHMAN

Shashi Tharoor. India: From Midnight to Millennium. New Delhi: Viking,

The publication of India: From Midnight to Millennium, like this special
issue of ARIEL, is one of the many ways in which India’s 50th year of
Independence is being celebrated. Its occasional nature notwithstanding, the book lays claim to be yet another though perhaps less ephem­
eral contribution to the ever-growing body of “writing on India,” at
one time—and notoriously—the exclusive preserve of “the Naipauls”
(276). Each of V. S. Naipaul’s three books on India was touted as in­
dispensable for anyone who seriously wants to come to grips with the
experience of India and as his definitive statement on India. And
of course everything that Salman Rushdie has had to say on India in
fiction or nonfiction is lapped up by the Western media as gospel
truth. Sunil Khilnani—in The Idea of India (1997), an antidote to Raja
Rao’s mystical The Meaning of India (1996)—wonders how “Indian his­
tory writing seems to have stopped in 1947 and why most of the post-
Independence history seems to have been written in the form of
novels” (1). Tharoor, whose first work (aspired to be) The Great Indian
Novel (1989), was a political satire, now seeks to remedy the situation.

As the subtitle of his book indicates, it purports to be a history of
contemporary India, albeit a self-confessedly personal one, with a lib­
eral humanist bias. Sir Isaiah Berlin, perhaps the last of the great lib­
eral humanists of the twentieth century, has spoken forcefully against
impersonal interpretation of historical change and argued in favour of
a form of historiography which must not omit questions of the charac­
ter, purposes, and motives of individuals. He contends that one must
try to find out who was responsible for a war, a revolution, an eco­
nomic collapse, a renaissance of arts and letters, a discovery or an in­
vention (44). So in India: From Midnight to Millennium, we find Tharoor
praising and blaming the Gandhis and Nehru and asking who was re­
sponsible for India’s post-Independence—as well as recent—success-
ful economic and foreign policies; for the autocracy during the Emer­
gency; and for the symbolic attack on its secularism in the form of the
destruction of the Babri structure. His liberalism allows him to make
use of E. P. Thompson’s flattering comment that India is “the most im­
portant country for the future of the world” (3) as his starting point
and even as his thesis statement. His avowal of pluralism is a natural
corollary of, and springs from, his liberal humanist bias. Almost antici­
pating Khilnani, he argues that the only possible idea of India is that
of a nation greater than the sum of its parts (5)—which calls to mind
Naipaul’s observation that the “Indian Union was greater than the
sum of its parts” (518)—and that the “singular thing about India is
that you can only speak about it in the plural” (8). We encounter more
clichés of this kind as we go along. When Tharoor avoids these, his
narrative can be very moving, and his infectious love for India, wafts
and all—to use a cliché—rings sincere.

Among the many anecdotes Tharoor uses to clinch a point about In­
dia’s castes, religions, and politics, there is the one about how a story
by him was mistaken by a Malayali doctor to be an autobiographical
piece on “[Tharoor’s] own upbringing in Kerala” (72). Tharoor
was immensely pleased because the intended criticism turned out to
be a compliment: “My short story was entirely fiction. But the Malayali
doctor’s reaction suggested that I had succeeded in evoking village
Kerala—a Kerala he knew far better than I did—convincingly enough
for him to consider it authentic” (72). Tharoor had reasons to feel
proud of his achievement, but mentioning this anecdote at the begin­
ing of a history work, however subjective, introduces misgivings in
the mind of the reader: how much of his(-)story can one rely on and, if
the anecdotes which follow are fiction, has Tharoor proved his thesis?

But such misgivings disappear when the reader comes to parts of
the book where Tharoor’s great (Indian) novelistic talents are on dis­
play. For example, the story of Charlis—a lower caste boy, “a skinny,
sallow youth with a pockmarked face and an anxious grin” (80-81),
who is shunned by Tharoor’s upper caste relatives in his ancestral vil­
lage in Kerala (“Scheduled Caste and Unscheduled Change”)—is a
tour de force. It is a moving tale of how Charlis overcomes all hurdles
and caste prejudice and is finally empowered through hard work and
governmental “affirmative action.” Similarly, Tharoor recounts mov­
ingly the familiar story of how the elephant-headed deity came to be
and how he won the race (against Kartikeya), evoking Tharoor’s own
childhood admiration of this deity, Ganesha. The “milk miracle,” con­
sidered by some as proof of Hindu irrationality, is given a fictional
turn with an amusing tone—which does undermine somewhat the
thoughtful account of Tharoor’s faith in humanism. He invokes Gan­
esha twice—once in Sanskrit and again in English translation—and
parodies the invocation in between “Om capillary actioneyeh namah”
(“I bow to thee O Lord Capillary Action”; 65). The two stories of
Ganesha and Charlis nicely foreground and contextualize the Mandal and Masjid politics respectively (and can be read as an intertext and counterpoint to Naipaul’s anecdotes on Periyar, Kakusthan, and Rashid, in *India: A Million Mutinies Now*).

In the chapter “Of Indians and Other Minorities,” Tharoor tries to grapple with the vexed issue of minorities and makes an impassioned plea for a pluralism based on the liberalism inherent in Hinduism. The next chapter, “A Future Without Shock,” appears to be offering this mantra for India’s salvation: liberalize and all will be well. The chapter on NRIs (Non-Resident Indians) is full of original insights. It deals with the ingratitude of the likes of Balji and others who have helped the terrorist cause. No less original are Tharoor’s remarks on Gandhi (for the first time we have someone pointing out that Gandhian methods worked because the government he fought against was manned by civilized people [19-20]), on the Shiv Sena and RSS (a right-wing political formation, accused of planning Gandhi’s assassination), and on the liberalization of India’s economy, which was first promised by Rajiv Gandhi and executed by Narasimha Rao and Man Mohan Singh. What is less easily understood is Tharoor’s pro-Congress bias: he compares this party with a temple (214). Similarly, his support for Narasimha Rao and anti-BJP tirade blinds him to the former’s role in the demolition of the Babri Masjid (171). In his balance sheet of India’s achievements and failures, he exhibits the rare Indian virtue of optimism: India may be corrupt, inefficient, and overcrowded, but its experiment with democracy is a big success and as such it has a great future. Talking about India’s police force, Tharoor says, “The occasional corruption, ineptitude, and complacency of the Indian police is properly the subject of anguished criticism by Indians, but in these qualities may also lie the best hope for the survival of Indian democracy” (269).

In his Introduction, Tharoor quotes from one of his old newspaper articles, written when he was 19, noting how he used to like big words. He does not seem to have changed. He is still using such terms as “on-eirodynia” (47). And why “soccer” instead of “football”? The words should have figured in the glossary, which glosses “Mahabharata” and “agitations.” He misuses the term “acronym”: how can OBC (Other Backward Classes; 108) and NRI (143) be acronyms? These blemishes notwithstanding, the book, with its refusal to countenance cynicism, makes refreshing reading—helped in no small way by Tharoor’s felicity with language and his narratorial skills. I highly recommend it to lovers and watchers of India.

SUMANYU SATPATHY

WORKS CITED
