

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.

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Shashi Tharoor. *India: From Midnight to Millennium*. New Delhi: Viking, 1997. Pp. xiv, 392. Rs. 400.

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 ephemeral 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 indispensable 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 history 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 liberal humanist bias. Sir Isaiah Berlin, perhaps the last of the great liberal 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 character, purposes, and motives of individuals. He contends that one must try to find out who was responsible for a war, a revolution, an economic collapse, a renaissance of arts and letters, a discovery or an invention (44). So in *India: From Midnight to Millennium*, we find Tharoor praising and blaming the Gandhis and Nehru and asking who was responsible for India's post-Independence—as well as recent—success-

ful economic and foreign policies; for the autocracy during the Emergency; 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 important 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 anticipating 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 India'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 beginning 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 display. 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 village 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 movingly 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," considered 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 Ganesha 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 "oneirodynia" (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.

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