

Persuasion, Oppression and Resistance under British Rule in Shashi Tharoor's *an Era of Darkness: The British Empire in India*

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Abstract

Shashi Tharoor's speech of 25 minutes in his distinct eloquent baritone, with more than a few punches of irony, at Oxford Union in England on 24th July 2015 The speech was published in print in October 2016 with the title 'An Era of Darkness' which is mainly devoted to debunking the myth of the *gifts of British rule* including democracy, geographical and political unity. we needed a book that tells us about the actual scale of atrocities perpetrated by the British and the modus operandi they used.

The book so aptly titled 'An Era of Darkness' goes deeper to vividly document the blinding darkness during the British rule in India and certainly this book is an eye opener to the last generation of Indians and also the present generation. In this book, Shashi Tharoor expands his theme of the greedy racist British mercilessly exploiting India, impoverishing its people, stealing its riches, destroying its social fabric and leaving it with a bankrupt economy, maladapted democracy and perplexed modernity. Even the so called gifts of colonialism like the English language and the railway network being only very mixed blessings. He provides an authoritative account of three phases of the Raj in India, from plunder to capitalist exploitation to financial imperialism.

Shashi Tharoor reminds the world through 'An Era of Darkness' the fact that we share with Britain a history of being oppressed for centuries, of bloody massacres, mass arrests, suppression of democratic rights and the supplanting of our own culture to serve the British interests. Thus, Shashi Tharoor very appreciably lifted the veil off the rose-tinted view of the Empire that distance and time may have accorded it in the past 70 years, especially to the present generation of Indians and the world in general.

Key Words: persuasion, Oppression, resistance, Era of darkness

INTRODUCTION

Persuasion is an important aspect of communication, it is very prominent in day to day life. Persuasion happens when people are forced to change their attitudes, opinions or behavior as Miller (1965) explains, "In

our daily lives we are stuck not by the ease of producing attitude change but by the rarity of it" (p.121)

Resistance is a reaction against change. It becomes evident in the presence of some pressure for change. Resistance to

persuasion is familiar to anyone who has offered advice or counseling. Resistance is the tug of war with persuasion, just as it takes two opposing teams for a tug of war competition, resistance and persuasion are opposing yet integral parts of a persuasive reaction.

Indians resisted British rule

British came to India as traders, gradually they got a strong foot hold on Indian soil and there came about domination which gradually made them rulers for more than two centuries. When British atrocities and harassment multiplied to a very great extent, Indians started to resist British rule.

Initially there was no resistance when they were just traders. It was through a very long process that trading turned to ruling. When actual ruling was happening, effects were being felt almost all over India, there were some sporadic incidents of resistance across India. From military that initial resistance came, we shouldn't forget that even a sepoy has his own cultural, religious feelings and deep down he is a common Indian. so he was well aware of the plight of common man under British rule .However masses were largely out of any kind of resistance.

English education actually helped Indians in developing awareness at a much broader level. Educated middle class were able to look at the contrast between western ideas of liberalism and the reality in India. Many first generation leaders actually came from educated middle class. But mass resistance came into picture only with the arrival of Gandhi. His experience in South Africa against racial discrimination already taught

him that masses can participate and this belief took the resistance a long way.

People suffered a lot during the colonial period. Some people revolted angrily and some of them revolted silently. Siraj-ud-Daulah revolted against Britishers in the battle of Plassey in 1757, then the Battle of Buxar, 1764 took place. Followed by Revolt of Vellore and many more. These all came under extremists.

Whereas, moderates way of resisting was silent. They boycott the foreign goods and organized movements like Swadeshi movement, Civil Disobedience Movement, Quit India Movement etc. to resist the injustice. News papers, Literature, Radical ways, Gandhian methods were different modes of resistance.

When British banned publication in Indian languages, large scale resistance was experienced. Dadabhai Naoroji's *drain of wealth* theory opened the eyes of many to realise what was actually done to India. Attacking British officials, Satyagraha, non cooperation, civil disobedience movements proved to be very powerful resistance, once it started it only kept growing as many Indians supported these groups, but whatever movement or any individual caused threat to British rule or caused an uprising, those individuals/freedom fighters were killed or hanged after being kept in jail for a few days.

Britishers continued to rule using the divide and rule policy to keep Indians quarrelling endlessly and the large scale conflicts between Hindus and Muslims only began under the colonial rule and was instigated by the British.

Persuasion in various ways was experienced on Indians which is clearly explained by Shashi Tharoor in almost all his works especially in 'An Era of Darkness'. Shashi Tharoor's speech in his eloquent baritone with more than a few punches of irony, at Oxford Union in England on 24th July 2015 on the topic, "Britain owes reparations to her former colonies", where he launched into a nationalist roar against the former colonial masters and tore the British rule to tatters in the assembly of representatives of the commonwealth nations.

Tharoor writes, *"India's flourishing democracy of seven decades is no tribute to British rule. It is a bit rich for the British to suppress, exploit, imprison, torture and maim people for 200 years and then celebrate the fact that they are a democracy at the end of it."*

Shashi Tharoor reminds the world through 'An Era of Darkness' the fact that we share with Britain a history of being oppressed for centuries of bloody massacres, mass arrests, suppression of democratic rights and the supplanting of our own culture to serve the British interests.

Thus, Shashi Tharoor very appreciably lifted the veil off the rose-tinted view of the Empire that distance and time may have accorded it in the past 70 years, especially to the present generation of Indians and the world in general.

In 1600, the East India Company began trading with India mainly in silk, spices and other profitable Indian commodities. Within a century and a half, the Company had become a major economic and

political power and began poking their nose into every affair of every kingdom in the country always taking the most opportunistic side. In 1757, Robert Clive defeated the ruling Nawab Siraj-ud-Daula of Bengal at Plassey through a combination of superior artillery and even more superior art of deception and subterfuge. A few years later, the young and weakened Mughal emperor, Shah Alam II, was cheated into issuing an edict that replaced his own revenue officials with the Company's representatives.

Over the next hundred years, the East India Company with the support of the British government, spread its military and political control over most of India, coercing one by one the numerous tiny kingdoms of the country using a combination of extortion, treachery and utter fraud backed by violence and superior force. This state of affairs continued until 1857, when large numbers of Company's Indian soldiers spearheaded the first major rebellion against colonial rule, which came to be famously called as the First War of Indian Independence. However, the rebellion was quashed ruthlessly and the British Crown took over direct power and ruled the country supposedly more benevolently.

The Indian independence struggle was a prolonged, non-violent and mass-based movement that included almost all the different sections of society at that time. It

also underwent a process of continuous ideological evolution and an emotional revolution. The basic ideology of the movement was anti-colonial, but it was supported by a vision of independent capitalist economic development combined with a secular, democratic, republican and civil-libertarian political structure.

After the 1930s, the movement took on a strong socialist orientation, due to the increasing influence of left-wing elements in the Indian National Army as well as the rise and growth of the Communist Party of India. All these movements were originated basically as a result of unrest and anger of common people against the British rule and its meaningless and persuading policies including compulsory usage of foreign goods, heavy taxation right from making of salt to irrigation of land. In 1946, the Great Naval Revolt almost snatched the liberation for India from the hands of the British ruling. The movement also served to promote solidarity among the masses overridden by communal, caste and gender divisions. However, India had to pay too dear a price on the eve of her Independence when the country was absurdly divided into three pieces between two parties viz., the Muslims and Hindus. The partition based independence of India and Pakistan saw over a million people massacred of both Hindus and Muslims in the largest and deadliest population exchange in history and the termination of democratic revolution.

The British government had already come to conclusion that it was not practical to continue holding on to India anymore. Moreover, India had ceased to generate any profit for the British government for many

decades. The Indian soldiers in air force, navy and army were also turning out to be rebellious, dangerous and difficult to trust. The best example is that of the INA, but the INA cannot be considered as an example of the Indian soldier rebelling against the British. Most of them were already prisoners of wars and had the choice of either joining the Japanese in the war or remaining prisoners of wars. The Indian National Army was first formed in 1942 consisting of Indian prisoners of wars of the British-Indian Army captured by Japan in the Malayan campaign and at Singapore. The INA actually formed a year after the Indian soldiers already fighting for the Japanese army in eastern Asia. However, INA was disbanded after strong differences surfaced between the INA and the Japanese military over its role in Japan's war in Asia. Subhash Chandra Bose's INA was formed in 1943. Most of its soldiers at that time were exempted from being tried as traitors by the British government since it was believed that they did not have much of a choice other than joining the INA.

The British never really expected the Indian soldiers to rebel against the colonial rule to cause them to distrust the Indian forces. It was the rebellion of the sailors of the Indian Navy in 1946 which scared the British Empire out of its wits. The specter of a nationwide civil war began to haunt the empire, moreover the costs of overcoming it was way far too high. The last straw on the back of the camel that made the British decide to leave India was that the Indian Navy and the Indian Air Force rebelled against the British government in 1946. The British tried to quell this mutiny with iron

fists but the massive public support the rebels got in Mumbai and Karachi completely demoralized them. It took the use of extreme fire power by the British ships to bring down the rebellion. The Rebellion showed that the British could no more take for granted the support of the Indian military. They then quickly decided to get out of India and pre-poned their departure by one whole year reckless of the dilemma it caused India.

However, in fact, the British had left India only on a temporary plan. They left their missionaries and institutions behind them in the strong belief that their sudden departure would invariably worsen the side-effects of partition and that sooner or later they would return and rule again when the Indian leaders cannot handle the impossible task of ruling the country. Another crucial reason for their unceremonious exit was that they could not afford the salaries of their employees in India post World War II.

The British doctored the narrative of their rule in India in their favor making themselves appear like saviors. However, it comes like a rude shock when Tharoor states the fact that from 1793 to 1900, about 5 million people died world over in all the wars combined, but in the short span of 10 years between 1891 and 1900, about 19 million people died in India due to famines alone. The famines were the biggest colonial holocausts and the most brutal case of inhumanity in modern times.

Shashi Tharoor opines that the regular famines of Bengal were the result of reckless planning, stale Malthusian ideas and highly racist leaders. The Prime

Minister of England, Winston Churchill, literally hated the Indians. While the people in Bengal were dying due to famine, the rice from the area was being exported to feed the British soldiers fighting the World War in Europe. Then, 2,065,554 Indian soldiers were raised for the World War II, and 149,225 Indian soldiers died between 1939 and 1945 in wars outside India.

Almost 30 million Indians died in British-induced famines during their rule. The worst however was the Bengal famine of 1943. Churchill also refused to allow free relief shipments of food from the United States, Australia and Canada into Bengal on the grounds that the food was needed more elsewhere and because the Japanese Navy was patrolling the Bay of Bengal and ordered the diversion of food from starving Indians to already well-supplied British soldiers and stockpiles in Britain and elsewhere in Europe including Greece and Yugoslavia. When asked about the famine, he wrote asking "*Why Gandhi hadn't died if there was really a famine in India?*" His disgusting show of enmity towards Indians and Gandhi in particular becomes clear when he suggested that the Mahatma should be "*... bound hand and foot at the gates of Delhi, and let the viceroy sit on the back of a giant elephant and trample him into the dirt*".

Tharoor's book serves another useful purpose. It defeats the false narrative that

Muslim rulers were necessarily tyrants. Tharoor tells us while they have been outsiders, they did not drain the wealth of the country to any other foreign nation. He makes a case that it was under the Muslim rulers that India's share grew up to become more than a quarter of the world's trade. It is a thought-provoking counter to the polarizing and often repeated argument that Muslims destroyed India.

Brilliantly narrated and passionately argued, *An Era of Darkness* will serve to correct many misconceptions about one of the most contested periods of Indian history as after all part of being colonized is the colonization of the mind. Tharoor's writing, with its expansive case studies and citations and sustained argument, all augmented by his felicity of language, may just come as an eye-opener to us all. Tharoor says that the misdeeds of the colonizers in the past can never be forgotten or taken lightly by the colonized and there is no justification that merits this discussion. As he so clearly says "*History, in any case, cannot be reduced to*

some sort of game of comparing misdeeds in different eras; each period must be judged in itself and for its own successes and transgressions."

CONCLUSION:

However, it was only a physical independence of a doomed civilization. The ideological, sociological, political, economical, geographical and mental scars remain and it seems will forever. It would not be an exaggeration to say that even after 70 years of independence, India is still reeling under the after effects of the colonial rule and there seems to be no solution or end to the innumerable problems sowed by the Britishers on the Indian soil. It seems to be a deep contamination that has polluted the purity and chastity of the Indian psyche. It is this disturbed consciousness and scars of past memories expressed so artfully, cogently and convincingly by Shashi Tharoor that we find in *An Era of Darkness*, which instantly and instinctively found a kindred echo in the collective mass of the Indians worldwide.

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