

Reimagining the British Rule Through Shashi Tharoor's 'An Era of Darkness: The British Empire in India'

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Abstract:

Shashi Tharoor's 25-minute speech at the Oxford Union in England on July 24, 2015, was released in print with the title "An Age of Darkness", which is largely dedicated to debunking the illusion of British rule's gifts, including democracy, geographical and political unity. In 'An Era of Darkness', Shashi Tharoor reminds the world that we share with Britain a history of centuries of tyranny, bloody massacres, mass arrests, the repression of civil rights and the replacement of our society to serve British interests. He gives an authoritative account of three phases of India's Raj, from plunder to colonial exploitation to financial imperialism. 'An Era of Darkness' stretches across an impressive body of works and introduces itself as an informed polemic on ravages of British Colonial rule in India. Here, an attempt has been made to reimagine the British rule in India through Shashi Tharoor's book titled "An Era of Darkness: British empire in India"

Keywords: British rule, Colonial exploitation, Era of Darkness, Imperialism, Indian economy.

Introduction

Shashi Tharoor's book titled 'An Era of Darkness', goes deeper to vividly document the blinding darkness during the British rule in India and serves as an eye-opener to the last generation of Indians and also the present generation (Ghani 28). In May 2015, Indian author and politician Shashi Tharoor spoke at the Oxford Union debate for the motion: British owe reparations to her former colonies. "The sun never set on the British empire, an Indian nationalist later sardonically

commented, because even God couldn't trust the Englishman" (Tharoor 223). This speech was published in print in October 2016, with the title 'An Era of Darkness', which won the Sahitya Akademi award in 2019. Tharoor eloquently explained how the British ruined the Indian economy, abused immense resources, and left India worse off when they departed. Shashi Tharoor's *An Era of Darkness*, beautifully narrated and vigorously argued, would help to correct many myths regarding one of the most disputed periods of Indian history. This paper attempts to look at how the historical narrative around colonial power is reinterpreted through Shashi Tharoor's book titled, 'An Era of darkness: British empire in India'. The residual problems of colonization in India, along with certain misconceptions surrounding the British rule in India are also explored through this study.

Reimagining the British Rule

"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 democracy at the end of it" (Tharoor 174). According to Tharoor, nothing was redeeming in the British rule of our country. On a humongous scale, what India had to suffer under them was an outrageous embarrassment and persistent brutality of a kind that it had never encountered before. In short, British rule in India was a period of darkness, during which an unprecedented number of man-made famines, wars, ill-administration, deportation of its citizens to distant lands and economic exploitation were endured. The text is produced in the background of the massive oppression and exploitation of the colonial masters that lasted for more than two centuries. The book is written in the context of the colonial darkness where our blood was not valued at all, where innumerable Indians perished like worms, where our forefathers toiled and moiled in the cotton and opium fields like Black American slaves (Tharoor 87).

British did everything in India for their own benefit and never for the Indians' benefit. They had a perfect strategy of divide and rule, breaking treaties at will, waging war and plundering with impunity. There are few Indians who would not have learned of the treachery that enabled Clive to triumph at Plassey, or of the incredible quantities of ill-begotten wealth that officials of the East India Company brought back to England with them. There was little appreciation for India's contributions to the wars that the British fought in India and overseas, particularly the two World

Wars, in men, material and cash. The noted historian and biographer of Nehru, Judith Brown, admits that "British taxpayers did not contribute a penny to the Raj."

In 1930, Will Durant, the American historian and philosopher, wrote that the 'conscious and deliberate bleeding of India from Britain... was the greatest crime in all history' (Tharoor 199). Nearly thirty-five million Indians perished in famines, epidemics, community disturbances and widespread slaughter, such as the repressive killings during the War of Independence, 1857 and Jallianwala Bagh massacre of 1919, as a result of commission and omission by the British. Besides the deaths of Indians, British rule oppressed India. When the East India Company took control of the region, India's share of world GDP was 23 per cent in the turmoil that ensued after the fall of the Mughal empire (Tharoor 36). It was only above 3 per cent when the British left. Extensive railway networks were not designed for indigenous transportation systems, but for the transport of British goods and the control of large territories. English education was given to groom and impose a native elite class with the Victorian ideals.

In the book, British colonialism is examined in its relation with capitalism and imperialism as commercial interest was at its essence. It led to the exploitation of the natural resources of the colonies. Indian taxpayers were forced to pay back 100 million pounds of money in that period. India supplied 17 million ammunition rounds, 6,000 rifles and machine guns, 42 million clothes were sewn and sent out of India, and 1.3 million Indian troops served in this war. Also, during that time, India had to supply 173,000 animals, 370 million tonnes of supplies and in the end the total value of everything that was taken out of India and India by the way was suffering from recession at that time and poverty and hunger, was in today's money 8 billion pounds (Nath 1060).

The consequence of colonialism is that, in the minds of the colonised people, the West still holds the role of an ideal state. Not only the land, but even their minds were colonised. The Indians were kept out of any position, recognition, prestige or office that the lowest Englishman might remember. Jawaharlal Nehru had once claimed that the Indian Civil Service was neither Indian, nor civil, nor a service (Tharoor 60). So, the fate of the Indians was determined only by the British and no Indians were allowed in this process. A few chosen Indians who served in the service are on a long sad journey. How British people were ill-treated and how they felt at a time when they faced an ugly degree of prejudice. This racism had an immense influence on the

minds of a few Indian colonial service soldiers. In relation to the judicial system, Tharoor stated the true image of the suffering saga of Indians about the court structure and the penal code. Justice was far blind, despite law and order in India, especially when the matter is between an Indian and an Englishman.

The British exploitative structure made deep headway in the organic Indian village right from the initiation of East India's corporate law, which imposed land income at exorbitant rates and thus enjoyed greater returns from land. The new land scheme of the British rulers, in addition to the above, also had a serious effect on the Indian economy.

A royal hierarchy of Indian indigenous rulers was established by the British that only legitimized their own rule and created a bureaucratic civil service based on segregation. The Raj is often credited with introducing democracy to India, but Tharoor argues that "the system of government has not only outlived any good it could do, it was unsuited to Indian conditions from the beginning and is primarily responsible for our main political ills" (Tharoor 113). India was dragged by the British with a strict criminal code. Repeated censuses split Indian society into competitive religious classes and fixed the hierarchy of castes in disorientation when castes were free to step up the social ladder in pre-colonial times. Also, large scale conflicts between Hindus and Muslims started during colonial rule. The early Congress' failures and short sightedness of the departing British led to a defeat to Jinnah and the Muslim League and the Partition's eventual misery. Divide and rule worked too well, as the British split India into two as their parting gift.

The implementation of land settlement in 1793, permanent settlement in Bengal leading to the zamindari system and the establishment of ryotwari system completed the exploitation process, leaving the peasants' socio-economic plight in a miserable state (Johnson 3). It was a long saga of British repression, in which state institutions were quite smartly undermined and weakened by hook or crook, by offering bribes and building up pressure. They set up a central legislative council, whose representatives were unfamiliar to the Indian social systems, which caused harm, instead of establishing self-government from the village level. One of the most strategic ideals of the British from the very beginning was the divide and rule.

The invasion of India by the British made things different. Indian agriculture started to stagnate and even deteriorate as a result of agricultural overcrowding, unsustainable demand and rise in landlordism for land revenue, rising indebtedness and impoverishment of growers, resulting

in extremely low yields per acre. Between 1903 and 1940, average agricultural output dropped by 16 per cent. The overcrowding in agriculture and the rise in sub-infeudation contributed to the subdivision and breakup of small holdings of land, most of which were unable to sustain their farmers. The extreme poverty of the vast majority of peasants has left them without any means to improve agriculture through the use of better cattle and crops, more fertilisers, and improved processing techniques. In addition, the "blending of agriculture and handicrafts" characterised India's conventional village economy. The internal equilibrium of the Indian economy was destroyed by the British Government. Beginning with the plunder of India's prosperity, the systematic degradation of our political institutions and education system, the brutal policies engineered by the British for profit-making divide and rule as a strategy leading eventually to partition, man-made famines, caste division, and much more.

Indians have already read about colonial rule over the subcontinent, its causes and effects, its positives and negatives in their school and college textbooks. In contrast to the reasonably balanced accounts given in many academic studies, Tharoor, however, has selected damning data from various sources and fashioned his content into a powerful satire against British rule. Shashi Tharoor rejects the notion that the British ruled with generosity and wisdom and for the well-being of Indians. He talks about numerous famines to denounce this version of the enlightened despotism' and understands that during the Raj, more than three crore individuals in India died of hunger.

British came to India as traders, gradually they got a strong foothold on Indian soil and there came about domination which gradually made them rulers for more than two centuries. Indians began to oppose British rule when British atrocities and harassment multiplied to a very large degree. Initially, when they were just merchants, there was no opposition. Trading has turned to govern over a very long process. There were some occasional instances of resistance throughout India when the actual ruling was taking place, consequences were being felt almost throughout India.

One of the points put forward by Tharoor is that if they had not been colonised by the British, Indians would have modernised themselves, as the Japanese did, or like those countries that were not colonised. He takes a very romantic view of 'Indian history' to substantiate this argument and refers to 'great educational institutions, magnificent towns ahead of any

conurbations of their period anywhere in the world, pioneering innovations, world-class manufacturing and industry, a high overall standard of living, economic policies that imparted growth, and ample prosperity-in short, all the markers' (Ganie 2).

Tharoor says that the misdeeds of the colonizers in the past can never be forgotten or taken lightly by the colonized and no justification merits this discussion. "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" (Tharoor 21). By 1600, the British empire in India began to trade in silk, spices and other lucrative Indian products. The company had become a force to be reckoned with in India within a century and a half.

The few undisputed advantages were never necessarily meant for the good of the colonised but implemented to support the needs of the colonisers, i.e., the English language, tea and cricket. "An Era of Darkness" would help to correct many misconceptions about one of the most controversial periods of Indian history. It defeats the false narrative that tyrants were inevitably Muslim rulers. Though they were outsiders, Tharoor assures us that they did not drain the resources of the country to any other foreign nation. India's share expanded to become more than a quarter of the world's trade under the Muslim rulers. It is a thought-provoking contrast to the polarising and often repeated assertion that India was ruined by Muslims.

In addition to exploring the many ways in which India was abused by the colonisers, ranging from the drain of national resources to Britain, the devastation of the Indian cloth, steel and shipping industries, and the negative transformation, Tharoor dismantles the claims of Western and Indian apologists for Imperialism on the supposed benefits of British rule, including democracy and politics.

Conclusion:

In "Era of Darkness", Shashi Tharoor exposes how traumatic British rule was for India with intellect, superior science, and distinctive irony. It was, however, the physical freedom of a society which was doomed. Ideological, sociological, political, technological, geographical and mental wounds exist, and it seems that they will remain forever. The book also reinvents the wheel of writing about nationalist culture. It would not be an exaggeration to say that India is still reeling under the after-effects of colonial rule even after 70 years of independence, and there seems to be

no solution or end to the countless problems sowed by the British on Indian soil. The author himself tells in the preface, "This book is not about British colonialism as a whole but simply about India 's experience of it".

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