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Research Article



Secular Philosophy of Peace in Shashi Tharoor's *Why I Am a Hindu*

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Abstract

The research article elucidates and critically evaluates the prominent ideologies and perspectives articulated by Shashi Tharoor in his seminal book, *Why I Am a Hindu*. He presents a cogent narrative on the diverse philosophical tenets of Hinduism, and accentuates their relevance in nurturing a secular and peaceful society. The crux of his exposition lies in the contention that Hinduism, as a religion, embodies pluralism, tolerance, and a non-dogmatic approach, which can be the catalysts for fostering peace in an increasingly polarized world. Not only in ancient era but also in modern scenario, here everyone is playing the “religious and communal card” to achieve the desired supremacy in society. Some

innocent believers of religion believe that the condition of their religion is extremely in danger and there is an urgent need to be the revival and protection of it. In act of protection of their religious ethics, they can inter any extreme to be under the political umbrella. There are many literary minds who wrote against such religious extremist who crossed the boundary constitutional secularism. Tharoor's adeptness in contrasting the philosophical underpinnings of Hinduism with the prevailing notions of religious chauvinism is emphasized, particularly in the Indian context. To him, the Hinduism began in the Indian subcontinent and spread other parts of the world through the migrants and immigrants. The central core of Hindu religion is that it respects every religion in tolerable limits. The novel is divided into three parts and each part of it well described the concept of Hinduism and Hindutva. It is all about tolerance and peace and not about supremacy to other religions. The article investigates the position of religious tolerance and tries to explore the challenge of radical extremism as a source of national disharmony that spares the opportunities of national unity. The focal point is the elucidation of how Tharoor propagates and transcends parochial boundaries. The article encapsulates an incisive exploration of the synthesis between ancient Hindu wisdom and modern secular values, and their collective potential in the establishment of a more inclusive and peaceful global society.

Keywords: Secularism, Union, Hinduism, Hindutva, Disharmony, Pluralism, Tolerance, Religious Studies, Ahimsa (Non-violence), Dharma (Righteous Duty), Socio-political Paradigms, Religious Chauvinism, Inclusivity

Shashi Tharoor, former International Civil Servant and the bureaucrat, is a well-known writer and columnist. He has authored a lot of literary works related to East West hybridism. In the long series of his work, *Why I am a Hindu* (2018) has a unique place regarding the Indian culture and religious belief. He has taken two words Hinduism & Hindutva and presented the secular ideology making comparison between these two. Hinduism has been embedded in parallel ironic ideological and value struggles. He further writes that in India, the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh has caught the vigor of Hinduism. Apart from this, he said that the RSS has not only captured the scene but has also prepared an agenda of Hindu Rashtra which, in his opinion, is not with the belief or value system of Hinduism, and because of this Hinduism seems to be going in the opposite direction. The book, *Why I Am a Hindu* is divided into three parts. The book begins with the analysis of Hinduism. It is clarified that the faith in Hinduism does not require any fundamental principles. In second chapter, the importance of Ekaki system of Hinduism is described as system to many and many to one. Further, he compares the Hindu Dharam with a banyan tree and explains how like a banyan tree Hindu dharma is being formed due to its open nature, sincerity, and diversity. There is no centralization of power in Hinduism and a multi-faith belief emerges in many gods, due to which the structure of theological power and democratic power is not the same. The author has further asserted that Hinduism has various religious texts, and these texts of Hinduism are also preachers and

defendants of each other. Various features of the diverse texts of Hinduism are analyzed and described in detail.

Next, the author has given an example of his Hindu faith. There has been an effort to discredit Hinduism in unintentional, unrestrained ways but Hinduism has been strengthening its roots even more. This chapter attempts to explain it here. These efforts are distinguished in the third chapter. Here questions have been put forth in order which seems to question the identity of Hinduism and these questions try to reduce the superiority of Hinduism on a wider scale. The first question is of caste. In his previous book *An Era of Darkness*, Tharoor answers the question that India had caste from the very outset although there was no caste system. Even in the contemporary scenario, the caste system is becoming weak and disappearing. He further claims that there is no excuse for such abusive practices and many Hindus have rejected the discriminatory aspect of the caste system. There is a further question of Hindu fatalism, for which the author considers the Indian attitude of waiting for fortune to rise. In the next chapter, the authors relate the roots of Hinduism to the times of the Indus Valley Civilization and also attests that the exact time of the emergence of Hinduism has not yet been ascertained. He further evaluated the idea of cultural nationalism given by Madhavrao Sadashivrao Golwalkar. After that, he has claimed the idea of cultural nationalism to be without significance and embedded in untruth. With this, he incorporates in the chapter the advent of the Bharatiya Jana Sangh, the political outfit inspired by the RSS that made a debut in Indian politics after independence. He also critically reviews the role of Pandit Deendayal Upadhyay in creating a political legacy on the idea of cultural nationalism and Hindu nationalism. In the next chapter, he covers the types of violence that are being committed in the name of Hinduism, citing the myriad manifestations of religion in the modern era and its practices. Hinduism has been establishing egalitarian and secular governance from the very beginning. Further, he tries to explain the cultural ethos born out of Hinduism. Here he also points out that most Hindus make up the most of the Indian population due to which a secular state has been established in India. He further underlined some of the questions raised on Hinduism such as the narrow-minded fundamentalists associating them with Hinduism in contemporary times whose concrete reflection can be seen in the politics of the Taj Mahal, the issue of conversion, and the politics of beef. However, in the analysis of the contemporary politics of the country, the author seems to be driven more by his political affiliation to a particular party rather than the facts that lay at the root of assertion of cultural nationalism in the country.

The last section of this book is curiously titled “Taking Back Hinduism”. In the opening chapter of this section, he claims that tolerance and acceptance are the core and traditional principles of Hinduism. Tolerance apart from being a major principle is a fundamental part of Hinduism that has imparted a distinct character and flexibility to the religion. He further states that whatever is being done by the Hindutva in contemporary times in its name shows their discomfort and insecurity. He says that Hinduism is not a stone pole. On the contrary, it has all the virtues in it. Finally, he considers Hinduism to be the religion of

the twenty-first century without fundamentalism. In Hindu dharma, the appropriate amount of force exists to show a way to the whole world through which Advaita can be ingrained in the whole world.

This book appears to be a good reading despite partisan presentation and interpretation of basic tenets of Hinduism at certain places. There are a few questions that have been asked by the author in this book. Answers to those questions are easy to find around if one is really interested in doing so. This book appears to be a good reading despite partisan presentation and interpretation of basic tenets of Hinduism at certain places. There are a few questions that have been asked by the author in this book. Answers to those questions are easy to find around if one is really interested in doing so. It is easy to predict with how much sincerity these questions have put forth. But it is not possible to prove with how much truth and loyalty these questions have been raised. The author is rich in artistic writing. He is an extraordinary and prolific thinker due to which he impresses with each of his work. The examples he has used are limited but best suited for his work in selective ways only. That way, he is not moving forward to understand the essence of Hindutva. He is in a steady state. His approach is also limited as he is using selective references to explain the situation. His view of Hinduism is narrow and western in origin, so the term he is using for Hindu Dharam is Hinduism. But the correct word is Hindutva, which is the right word, as in Sanatani tradition, ism or “vad” has no belief or praxis. Nevertheless, this book will stimulate a bit of curiosity among the votaries of soft hindutva in India. It also establishes the author as an ideologue of soft-hindutva, who has interest of the colonial masters, will eventually serve Hindu tradition. To him, Indian religious belief has taken materialist aspects of life. Indian people are facing material inequality, communalism and casteism because of stereotype religious belief. Shashi Tharoor as a true humanitarian focuses his attention on Caste discrimination and tackles it. To him, Indian people silently watching the public humiliation of his own people as a citizen of humiliated castes. There is a highly metaphysical tradition created authoritative religious totem. They have started performing magical tricks to attract the people and to be economically strong. Now, Indian philosophy leads us toward social oppressions and power.

In the second part of the novel, Tharoor Sir differentiates Hindutva and Hinduism on the ground of its function. To him, Hindutva is exclusive interpretation radical orthodoxy. It is dominant religious tradition using fruitful aspects of the Vedanta, highly metaphysical and superstitious, Brahmanical and Sanskritised construction. It propagates on the pattern of colonialists who draw a concept of supremacy and denounce other religion. Here he draws factual proof from old texts of Rig Veda and Upanishads. To him, the follower of Hindutva has created the concept of otherness. They accept that the follower of their Hindu God and Goddess are their own and follower other God are marginal or others. Whereas Hinduism is a philosophy as it doesn't impose people any rules or norms to prove him of Hindu faith. Hinduism is liberal and open to acceptance. It is all about tolerance and equality of other religious belief. It is a philosophical concept that is not about supremacy to other religion.

There is proper advocacy to respect all the religion and their ethical values. It opposes denounce of others' belief or faith. There is also the analysis of Puranic story, the origin of the Gods. Hindu God and Goddess are symbolization of the power, valour, courage acceptance of all sects or people belonging to different strata of society.

The stories of mythologies are based on moral ethics and scientific facts. These stories describe an ideal social structural setup and focus on several factors like gender equality or animal loving and tolerance. The first part of the treatise in third chapter discusses the issues of so-called self-proclaimed “babas” or “mataji’s” who entertain through magical tricks to attract the innocent people. He describes the incidents related to such “babas ironically” and the present the alive image of Indian society where innocent people fall in trap of these babas or gurus. In this section, he also focuses his attention of the caste system as one of the most critical issues of the country. Caste system is most dangerous flaw and blot in harmony of Indian people. It has poisoned the aspects of humanity. It is root of severe discrimination against the people belongs to a lower class. In the end, the book covers some great and inspiring personalities like Ramanuja, Mirabai, Raja Rammohan Roy, Swami Vivekananda, Mahatma Gandhi and many others with their perspective on Hinduism.

In second part of the book focuses on deviate form of Hinduism known as “Hindutva”. To Tharoor, Hindutva is an instrument of Religion utilizes in politics to achieve fruitful result. Although India is a secular country yet few leaders playing religion card to distract from the main problems of the country which fellow countrymen are suffering. They try to create radical fundamentalism or the distortion of social fabric in the name of Hindutva. It is destructive and unacceptable way of politics in ideal democracy. In this part, he has dealt the origin of Hindus and the “Aryan Invasion Theory”. He states thus:

the word ‘Hindu’ did not exist in any Indian language till its use by foreigners gave Indians a term for self-definition. Hindus, in other words, call themselves by a label that they didn’t invent themselves in any of their own languages, but adopted cheerfully when others began to refer to them by that word. (Of course, many prefer a different term altogether—Sanatana. (*Why I Am a Hindu*, 67)

This part of the book is soul part of the book which presents some unique and burning issues of religious bigotry, appeasement and the “beef politics”.

Last part of the book is also very remarkable. It provides vivid image of culture and religious pluralism. Here he shares his personal experience which he practically witnessed during his stay in Central Java. He states that he has seen the majority of the Muslim population dwells and ‘Ramayana’ or ‘Mahabharata’ are the epics read in every household there and they know the stories of Hindu epics. Here he confidently claims that the Muslims of java know the Hindu mythology more than any ‘Hindu’ who promoting ‘Hindutva’ or fundamentalism. He further opens the craze of Hindu mythology in Javanese people who put mythological name of his family members as Sita, Arjuna, and Rama etc. They entertain themselves with reading ‘Hindu’ epics as epics for all and by all. It is part of their culture to read the Hindu epics since childhood. In short, the whole book deals the Secular philosophy

of India. The description is much clear, authentic and logical. The book is based on true thinking, constitutional which opposes destructive radical philosophical and religious orthodoxy that incorporated in the society for personal gains.

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