

A Hindu Finds his Truth

Author-politician Shashi Tharoor says it's time to reclaim India's national identity

By Bhargavi Kulkarni

— NEW YORK

There is a need to reclaim Hinduism as a faith and social practice from its current misleading state, said author-politician Shashi Tharoor. "While Hinduism is a national identity, Hindutva is extremely political."

Tharoor was speaking at the Delhi Art Gallery in Manhattan, June 26, at the launch of his two books "Inglorious Empire: What British did to India" and "Why I am a Hindu." The event was hosted by the Indo-American Arts Council and the Delhi Art Gallery. In a lively discussion with Tunku Varadarajan, a fellow at Stanford University's Hoover Institution, Tharoor talked about what Hinduism was and is — and what it wasn't meant to be.

In "Inglorious Empire," Tharoor aims to tell the "real story of the British in India — from the arrival of the East India Company to the end of the Raj — revealing how Britain's rise was built upon its plunder of India," according to the book's synopsis on the Hurst Publishers website. British imperialism justified itself as enlightened despotism for the benefit of the governed, but Tharoor "takes on and demolishes this position, demonstrating how every supposed imperial 'gift' — from the railways to the rule of law — was designed in Britain's interests alone," the website says.

On the other hand, "Why I Am a Hindu" is Tharoor's attempt to differentiate between Hinduism and Hindutva. The book offers a brief history of Hinduism, then moves on to politics. The right term in the Indian context is not



Author-politician Shashi Tharoor, left, and Tunku Varadarajan, a fellow at Stanford University's Hoover Institution, discuss Tharoor's new books "Inglorious Empire: What British did to India" and "Why I Am A Hindu," at the Delhi Art Gallery in Manhattan, June 26. The event was hosted by the DAG and the Indo-American Arts Council.

secularism, but pluralism, he says in the book, "for India is and has long been a land of many religions."

Most of the evening's discussion revolved around "Why I Am a Hindu," which is to be released in the U.S. this fall. The author-politician acknowledged that while his book addresses issues that he has been thinking about since childhood and has written about before, "increasingly as political Hinduism in the form of Hindutva came front and centre of our public discourse, it has become more and more necessary to challenge the uncontested assumption that the only Hinduism is the RSS branch of Hinduism, which it is not." A vast majority of Hindus don't share the politics of Hindutva or even some of the not-so-benign assumptions of Hindutva, whereas they are proud of their Hinduism and practice the faith, he said.

Hinduism is a very tolerant religion, Tharoor said. "Acceptance of difference goes

to the heart of Hinduism," he said. Giving examples of his growing-up years, which are included in the book, Tharoor said that being raised a Hindu, his early memories of Hinduism are what he saw practiced at home by his own father.

"A devout man, he would go straight from his bath to the prayer room but never obliged anyone else at home to join him," Tharoor said of his father. He described this as an early lesson in the Hindu idea that prayer or worship was between you and your idea of your maker, it was very personal. "And if I wanted to pray or worship I had to find my truth," he said.

With the rise of the Hindutva brigade and the distortion of Hinduism, the Congress MP from Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala said the Opposition has its work cut out for itself. The role of the Congress he said "is to neutralize the argument that BJP is the only party working for the benefit of the Hindus.

They are not the only Hindus," he said. While the Opposition is speaking for majority of Indians, he acknowledged that the party is facing real challenges. "The Opposition needs to make its voice heard," he said, adding, "we are up against a well-oiled machine."

There are serious risks to the nation if BJP comes into power again, he said. India needs to focus on both the hardware and software development like infrastructure, education and healthcare, he said. If Modi had fulfilled his promises of economic growth job creations — "the dreams that were sold to the nation" — "acche din" — it could've been a different story, Tharoor said. But the party got sidetracked and focused only on their cultural agenda, he said. "The future of India lies in the hands of Indians," he said, "We have to make the right decisions."

But at the same time, Tharoor said India's history makes him optimistic that the Narendra Modi-led government will not be able to do permanent damage to India's reputation as a raucous liberal democracy. "The classic elements of fascism don't exist in today's India, and can't be brought in here because the society is not amenable to that sort of treatment," he said. "We are multi-ethnic, we are multi-religious, we have a free media, and we have multiple institutions such as the Supreme Court, the press, the parliament."

Tharoor had been at the United Nations for 29 years and served as undersecretary-general. He is the author of 14 other books. Tharoor has won a number of literary awards and was named a Global Leader of Tomorrow by the World Economic Forum in Davos in 1998.

Asian-Americans Advancing Justice-LA Launches Hindi Helpline

A Hindi helpline has been launched by the Asian Americans Advancing Justice — Los Angeles in an effort to expand its services to the South Asian community as part of AAAJ-LA's Asian Language Legal Intake Project (ALLIP).

Launched with the support of the Democracy Fund and the New Americans Campaign, the helpline "will allow Hindi-speaking individuals seeking assistance to speak with Advancing Justice-LA community advocates in their native language. Callers will also be able to receive assistance in Urdu," the website says.

"Many immigrant communities, particularly Asian communities, face language barriers, which continue to impact their ability to access critical services such as citizenship, health care, social services, and the judicial system," said Reshma Shamasunder, vice president of Program Strategy at Asian Americans Advancing Justice — Los Angeles.

According to the website: "The new helpline is a national line that will support South Asian-serving organizations across the country by connecting communities to local resources such as South Asian Helpline and Referral Agency (SAHARA) and South Asian Network (SAN), two prominent South-Asian serving organizations in Artesia."

The website noted that as of 2014, "lawful permanent residents from India are the fourth largest population of immigrants eligible to naturalize in the country with 560,000 who are eligible. There are another 140,000 lawful permanent residents from Pakistan who are eligible. South Asian populations comprise almost 1 million of the 8.8 million residents eligible to become U.S. citizens."

The website said: "ALLIP started in 2002 and consists of toll-free helplines in Chinese (Mandarin and Cantonese), Khmer, Korean, Tagalog, Thai, Vietnamese, and English. The helplines prioritize assistance to low-income community members in the following areas: domestic violence and family law, employment, citizenship, and immigration. The addition of the Hindi helpline reflects Advancing Justice-LA's commitment to serving the nation's rapidly growing Asian American and Pacific Islander community."

FIA to Host India Day Parade Aug. 19



Federation of Indian Associations of New York, New Jersey and Connecticut president Srujal Parikh speaks at a curtain raiser held at the Consulate General of India in New York, June 28, to announce the 38th India Day Parade. FIA's flagship event, to be held on Aug. 19, will commemorate India's 72nd Independence Day.

