

Reflections on Pandemic Times and the British Rule in Shashi Tharoor's *An Era of Darkness: The British Empire in India*

Bhaktipriya Bhargava

Abstract

It is well known that the British Era was marred by cruelty to native citizens. Shashi Tharoor counters the same in *An Era of Darkness: The British Empire in India*. He exposes the British, their adopted nobility, and their insincerity of purpose throughout the narrative. This chapter primarily brings forth the British induced hardships faced by Indian citizens. But there were visible traces of same hardships during the COVID pandemic times. Hence, it is essential to reflect upon both the events. The present effort focuses on some essential aspects pertaining to both the cases. For instance-what are the similarities between both? How do these affect India socio-economically, politically, culturally, and individually? And what are their ramifications?

Keywords: British Era; Cruelty; Darkness; Narcissism; Pandemic.

Introduction

Leo Tolstoy wrote aptly that "cruel people are busy all the time, trying to find justification for the cruelty of their dealings". Cruel people are narcissist. Narcissism in psychology is referred to as "selfishness, involving a sense of entitlement, a lack of empathy, and a need for admiration, as characterised by a personal type" (*Lexico*). It makes one extremely self-centred and leaves him excessively preoccupied with individual "needs, often at the expense of others". It seems cruelty serves as an outlet for narcissism. People with cruel tendencies always hold some hidden motives and their atrocious actions are guided by them. They first think about the object or the feeling that will satiate them. Once they decide this, they find their targets, closely observe their behaviours—their strengths and weaknesses,

and start formulating their plan to achieve their desired aims. They begin by befriending their targets, digging into their desires, and by rigorously knowing them. In the next step, they isolate the prey and make them dependant on themselves; and once that is achieved they manipulate the victim and eventually make them a scapegoat.

It needs to be understood that cruel people prove the victim as a culprit and present themselves as victims (in reality, a pseudo victim) before society. Their evil psyche makes use of psychological tactics to attain their ends. The British evidently worked on the same lines! Whenever they wished to achieve something from Indian people, they made their objective "divinely providential", noble, and benign. Shashi Tharoor counters the same. He has exposed the British, their adopted nobility, and their insincerity of purpose throughout the narrative. He aptly calls them ruthless. For, their cruelty left no facet of Indian life untouched during their cruel rule. They began by baffling Indian textile workers. In order to monopolise trade they "squeezed out other foreign buyers". But this did not satisfy them because:

The soldiers of The East India Company obliged, systematically smashing the looms of some Bengali weavers and, according to at least one contemporary account (as well as widespread, if unverifiable, belief), breaking their thumbs so they could not ply their craft. (8)

Their arbitrariness extended to administrative arena as well. The administrative excess of Warren Hasting invited his "unsuccessful" impeachment. He had around twenty-two charges against him. These included: his Bengal policy, his involvement in Rohilla war, ill-treatment towards Raja Chait Singh of Benares, pressure on Begums of Oudh to extract debt money, and so on. Eventually, after a long trial, he was acquitted and pensioned off! It was Edmund Burke who had led the prosecution. In his speech, he accused the Company of the unheard cruelties directed against Indians. Tharoor quotes Burke and provides a detailed description of the violation of Bengali women during tax collection:

"They were dragged out, naked and exposed to the public views, and scourged before all the people...They put the...of the women into the sharp edges of this pit split bamboos and tore them from their bodies" – leading Sheridan's wife to swoon in horror in Parliament. (18)

In the next case, Tharoor counters the claim made by the "Anglophile Indians" which maintained that though the British were imperialist, "but they rule generously and wisely for the greater good of their subjects" (176). The author proves the claim wrong by revealing the stark realities of their ruthless rule. He gives vivid details of the British induced famines in India. The famines did not occur naturally; they were invented by the British ingenuity. The shortage of food and failures of relief camps were planned. He cites figures that there were reportedly "fifteen famines during the seven decades" of the colonial rule. He also brings to notice that it is only under the British rule "the last large scale famine took place", for the free India has faced no such event since. He adds that Indian democracy has worked more efficiently and "proved more responsive to the needs of draught-affected and poverty stricken Indian".

It is true that Indian governments' farsighted policies have done satisfactory work. The focus has been on agricultural development, public delivery system, buffer stock management, and on ensuring a smooth supply of food grain by downplaying profiteering and preventing holding and black marketing. The author mentions Amartya Sen's insight that "it is now widely accepted doctrine that famines are nearly always avoidable". But the British engineered them. He mentions one of the British administrators' acknowledgements that: "the frequent famines were not the result of food shortage per se, but the inability of people to purchase food or, in a scholar's words 'a complex economy crisis induced by the market impacts of drought and crop failure'." (179)

From 1876 to 1878, nearly 58 million people were affected due to famine. It affected regions like "Madras, Mysore, Punjab, Central India, Bombay, and Hyderabad" (*History* 115), among others. It took 5 million lives per year but the British villainy did not end here. Although, they did establish the first Famine Commission under Richard Strachey, their attitude remained remorseless. They blamed India and its scenario for the famines. The responsible factors, according to them, were – "the burgeoning population", "declining rice production", "the role of climate", and "other uncontrollable factors", including "lack of transportation" and even "indigenous culture". Contrary to the British claim, the population of India was already in decline due to hunger, disease, and brutality. And India held a considerable position in the world economy in terms of agriculture export. The British had already introduced sufficient means of communication and transportation, for example post offices, telegraph services, and the railways. The first train ran from Mumbai to Thane in 1853. Questionably, why did they not employ these resources effectively if they were

concerned for the welfare of Indians! It is because they did not want to.

The author claims assertively that “India’s grain continued to be exported to global markets”. He quotes Professor Mike Davis that “London was eating India’s bread” (183) while Indian were dying due to lack of food. The British also had denied accepting any “charitable donation to save lives”. Famine-induced hardships were increased by arbitrary taxation, frequent threats by the collectors, and unlawful revenue collection. The brutality of the British brutes resulted in the following:

Scores of corpses were tumbled into old wells, because the deaths were too numerous for the miserable relatives to perform the usual funeral rites. Mothers sold their children for a single scanty meal. Husbands flung their wives into ponds, to escape the torment of seeing them perish by the lingering agonies of hunger. Amid these scenes of death, the Government of India kept its serenity and cheerfulness unimpaired. (198)

Now this “serenity” indicates their deep rooted narcissism. The author adds that cattle were also the victims of brutality because they were exported for “hides and skins”. He exposes the “monstrous behaviour of Winston Churchill who deliberately ordered” diversion of Indian food from “starving” natives to British soldiers.

The colonisers also effectuated forced migration, obligatory transportation, and indentured labour. Indian labour was preyed and was forced to work at a low cost in the British colonies worldwide. The masters used inhuman methods to seek their unwilling willingness, for example coercion, incarceration, and torture. They were used as “cogs in the wheels of the imperial machinery”, toiling hard at sugar plantations, labouring in infrastructural projects, clearing “jungles” et cetera. Many of these died tragic death during breath-choked journeys with railway compartments stuffed with humans as if they were animals. Thousands of them could never come back at the expiration of their contracts due to hidden contractual clauses. Their long stay in the foreign land gave rise to loneliness, displacement and isolation. Many of these trapped labours died with unfulfilled hope of returning to their homelands.

The argument pertaining to the British brutality is incomplete without mentioning 1857 revolt. The revolt was an outlet for Indian to vent their discontent with the British rule. The period before 1857 was not at all peaceful, for it was marked with peasants’ agitations, tribal protests,

revolutionary activities, and armed uprising. The revolt was the cumulative effort against the British rule which included native princes, soldiers, peasants, former landlords, and commoners. The bloodthirsty rulers suppressed the revolt:

With extreme brutality, with hundreds of rebels being blown to bits from the mouth of cannons or hanged from public gibbets, women and children massacred (in retaliation, it must be admitted, for the killing of British women and children) and over 100,000 lives lost. (194)

The proclaimed Mugal emperor, Bahadur Shah Jafar, was left alive and pensioned off but his family suffered the horrendous treatment. The author claims that “most of his sixteen sons weretried and hanged, while several were shot in cold blood” (196). Civilians faced the most barbarous treatment: they were publicly flogged, assaulted, shot, and left “butchered”. The revolt resulted in the Queen’s takeover of the British administration. Her proclamation was called “Magna Carta of Indian people”. The natives were promised religious freedom, equal treatment, and effective governance. But the proclaimed myth got exposed in Jaliawala Bagh Massacre. The saga of the massacre has been told, retold, and represented time and again but the author has delved deep into Dyer’s psyche and the British narcissism:

The Jaliawala Bagh Massacre was no act of insane frenzy, but a conscious, deliberate imposition of colonial will. Dyer was an efficient killer rather than a crazed maniac; he was merely the evil of the unimaginative, the brutality of the military bureaucrat... (200)

The vicious conduct of the British continued throughout the colonial rule— during partition of Bengal, Swadeshi movement, Non-cooperation movement, including the Quit India movement of 1942. Tharoor adds, “gang rape by the police was not uncommon: 73 women were violated by police in a bid to terrorise the satyagrahis” (197). Prisoners were treated savagely and were “forced to lie” unclothed on “blocks of ice”. It was the British Raj which promoted communal riots in India and which consequently resulted in the partition. The partition induced riots gave rise to atrocities against women along the borders. They were raped, slashed, and put to death. Surprisingly, millions of Indians faced the same characteristic issues during COVID-19 pandemic. There were widespread scenes of migration, hunger, violence, and death. Millions had to migrate empty-bellied and barefoot from metropolitan cities on their way back home.

As per the government data, “1.25 millions” were stranded between me-tropolis and their hometowns. To add:

...33 per cent of the total migrant population has had no access to food since 24 March, the day...announced a comprehensive lock-down that has meant shutting down factories, work sites, small and large businesses and transport. In a matter of a few hours, mil-lions of daily-wage workers lost their job and found it difficult to stay in their rented house.(Kapoor, “Stories of hunger...”)



Figure 1. Migrant workers leaving Maharashtra towards Madhya Pradesh during Covid-19 pandemic lockdown.

(Source: *The Hindu*)

Unending lockdowns resulted in loss of employment and a series of se-rious problems. The migrants were forced to sell their belongings to pay transportation charges! Those who could not afford the same had to travel via bicycle or barefoot in scorching heat. Did not scenes of mass exodus with bundled luggage bring back memories of partition? Helpless walked heavily with “bags slung on their backs, a bundle on their heads and chil-dren cradled in one arm” (Mohanty and Dhurbo). Profiteering, black-mar-

keting, hoarding, supply-chain mismanagement scripted starvation, scarcity of medicines, and insufficient health services. The pandemic affected women severely like any other calamity or disaster. They faced increasing cases of domestic violence in terms of harassment, rapes, and killings. According to the figures released by National Commission on Women the related complaints doubled after lockdown got imposed.

In the book, Tharoor concludes his case by asserting that “famine, forced migration, and brutality: three examples of why British rule was despotic and anything but enlightened” (204). He is correct, for despotism, brutality, inhumanity, bestiality, and callousness have nothing to do with enlightenment or the British claimed “Divine Providence”. The British era impacted the nation at individual, social, cultural, political, and economic level; so did the pandemic. Families lost their kin, society lost its fervour, politics failed in ensuring welfare society, and the economy slowed down for months. Both the events exposed severe ramifications and caused rippling effects on the fundamental structure of society. While cruelty characterised the British’s characters, the pandemic recalled, refreshed, and reminded of the same again.

Works Cited:

Ahir, Rajiv. A Brief History of Modern India. Spectrum Books (P) Ltd, 2017.

Cuddon, J.A., and Habib, M.A.R. Dictionary of Literary Terms & Literary Theory. PenguinBooks, 2014.

Emmanuel, Meera. “Independence Day: The lingering effects of the British Colonial Rule on the Indian Legal System”. Bar Bench. 15 Aug. 2018, www.barbench.com/columns/independence-day-special-legal-system-british-colonial-rule-in-india. Accessed 16 January 2021.

Huchhanavar, Shivraj S. “The Legal System in Ancient India”, www.legalservicesindia.com/article/1391/The-Legal-sytem-in-India.html.

Kapoor, Sanjay. “Stories of hunger: India’s lockdown is hitting the poorest”, www.asia.fes.de/news/stories-of-hunger-indias-lockdown-is-hitting-the-poorest.

- Mambrol, Nasrullah. "Subaltern (Postcolonialism)". *Literary Theory and Criticism*, 2016, www.literiness.org/2016/08/subaltern-postcolonialism/. Accessed 16 March 2022.
- Mohanty, Debabrata, and Dhurbo, Jyoti. "Pandemic teaches a tragic lesson in migration", www.google.com/amp/s/www.hindustan-times.com/india-news/pandemic-teaches-a-tragic-lesson-in-migration/story-69EIk6MB70zNDX1VsRTx0J_amp.html.
- Muthumari, Tmt M, and Ahmed, Thiru Zafar. *History. Government of Tamilnadu*, 2007. "Narcissism". *Lexico. Oxford University Press*, www.lexico.com/definition/narcissism. Accessed 22 February 2022.
- Rashid, Omar, Anand, Jatin, and Mahale Ajeet. "India Corona Virus Lockdown |Migrant workers and their long march to uncertainty." *The Hindu*, 4 Mar 2020, www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-coronavirus-lockdown-migrant-workers-and-their-long-march-to-uncertainty/article61954382.ece.
- Tharoor, Shashi. *An Era of Darkness: The British Empire in India*. Aleph Book Company, 2016.