



A DESIRE TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

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By Udeshi Amarasinghe | Photography Mahesh Bandara and Menaka Aravinda

Dr Sashi Tharoor, Member of Indian Parliament

You have written greatly about the effects of colonisation on India. Sri Lanka too is a former British colony. Our countries are still living with challenges that we inherited from that time. What can you tell us about this?

My writing is certainly valid for Pakistan and Bangladesh because we share a common history and experience. While I do not know much about Sri Lanka's experience with the British, the administration here was somewhat different to the sub-continent. Having said that, there are some elements that we do have in common; the East India Company when they came to India systematically destroyed existing industries by deliberate action, expropriated resources, committed outright theft as well as plunder of many kings and maharajas, and I am sure the equivalent would have happened in Sri Lanka as well. There was a conscious effort to dictate the terms of trade to favour British commercial interests. Therefore, those existing trade links of Indian companies, for an example – textile exports, were completely interrupted, in fact, destroyed for practical purposes and a captive market was created for British goods such as textiles.

Then there was the colonisation of the mind; the instilling of the idea that everything that was pre-existing in a country had to be ossified, archaic, oppressive and superstitious, and that the British way was superior. The imposition of British laws, the British ways of seeing and doing things, the decision to favour certain communities over others for Britain's own purposes – whether it was in our case the caste system, in your case more ethnically based – all of these are examples of the ways in which fractures and distortions of British colonialism affected our societies. In India we had the additional complication of divide and rule, which was sparked through a specific experience from which I believe there is no equivalent in Sri Lanka. The big Indian revolt in 1857-58 when the British saw Hindus and Muslims fighting side by side under the banner of the Moghul Emperor against the British and in order to forestall that from happening again the British systematically set about instilling a strong sense of separateness in the Muslim community in order to promote division.

How can former colonies emerge from the effects of colonisation?

Embrace the past but leave it in the past. I have often spoken about the old Indian habit of forgive and forget. We must forgive, because anger and hatred are simply unproductive emotions. But we must not forget.

We must face up to our own history quite squarely. I'm not talking about aligning the history to affect our present. Today we are where we are. We may not have particularly chosen to come to the present through that route, but we are where we are and there is absolutely nothing productive to be gained by living in the past. So embrace the past but leave it in the past. I have often spoken about the old Indian habit of forgive and forget. We must forgive, because anger and hatred are simply unproductive emotions. But we must not forget. And remembering should include recording the past in our school text books, sustaining our collective memory through the setting up of a museum of colonialism, all of these would be important for the health of our society. That is my plea in the Indian context and I suspect it applies here too.

The British too have a couple of measures that they should take. One is certainly to also remember instead of conveniently wallowing in historical amnesia, by which even students doing their A/Levels in History do not study colonial history in Britain. All they have is gauzy romanticised soap operas portraying a very artificial, glamorous sort of view of the glories of the empire, without any of the stark realities experienced by the colonized being depicted. I feel that this needs to be addressed immediately.

The second that I have argued for is an apology from the British to cleanse the sin. In India we had the Jallianwala Bagh massacre of 1919. The centenary is coming up in a couple of years and that would be the perfect occasion for an apology. The reasons being that this massacre was an exemplar of the worst of the Raj, not only in terms of its cruelty as well as brutality, but also because of the many other accompanying elements of that particular episode. That is the betrayal of promises made during the First World War by the British; the indifference to Indian suffering that followed the massacre; the racism and brutality of other punishments accompanying it; and then the justification and the reward given to the cruel perpetrator of the massacre, including being hailed by that flatulent voice of Victorian imperialism, Rudyard Kipling as "The Man Who Saved India". This was a man who had butchered thousands of innocent men, women and children. This entire incident makes it the

perfect epitome of all that was wrong with colonialism and its centenary would be a perfect opportunity for the British to actually come and apologize.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has also appreciated your views, what can you tell us about this?

I would say that on this particular subject Mr Modi and I could see eye to eye. But even there only up to a part because Mr Modi has in some of his earlier speeches spoken of 1,200 years of foreign rule, whereas I only speak of 200 years of foreign rule. To Mr Modi and many of his followers the Muslim rulers of India are also foreigners. I believe they are not because even if originally their ancestors came from Central Asia, they stayed in India, married here, assimilated with the country and became Indian. They actually contributed to India's civilization by enriching our soil with painting, art, music, sculpture, architecture and so on which has left enduring traces on India. Therefore, to me they are not foreigners. It is not correct to consider them as foreigners.

As for the British, I actually feel that Indian nationalists, whether from the political left, right or centre would all have the same perspective.

India and South Asia in general were thriving economies. Today India and China are the largest and strongest economies in the world. These countries had advanced manufacturing sectors in the past. What are your thoughts on this?

As late as 1820, India and China together accounted for 50 per cent of global GDP. Those days are not coming back. Let us be truly, very honest and just accept that, even though it has been suggested by some that the rise of India and China today would be a reassertion of the natural order of things through most of human history. Even though that is a very interesting argument, it cannot be held because the core comparison is not there. For example, in the first century BC India was probably the USA of the world in terms of the share of global GDP, may be even larger proportionately than the USA is today. Back in the 1700s, the revenues of the Indian Emperor exceeded that of every crowned head of Europe put together; it was ten times the revenues of the Emperor of



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France. That kind of distinction between the riches in countries such as India and China, and the relatively modest prosperity of the Western countries, is not going to come back and we should not hope for that. We want to see a world where everyone prospers. We are not trying to bring anyone down. Rather than preaching the decline of the West, we should speak about the rise of the rest. The rise of the rest is epitomized principally, but not only, by China and India.

The economic growth of many other countries in this region is also very important. The East Asian Tigers actually beat us to it. They started growing in the 60's and they continued growing. Take a country like South Korea for example, after the devastation of the



Korean War in the early 1950s, they were actually worse off than India, Pakistan or Bangladesh or Sri Lanka. Today, of course, in terms of per capita income they are way ahead of us. Asia has grown enormously, and will continue to maintain a certain level of prosperity because once you reach a certain critical mass there is no need to slip, you can build on that, but build more slowly. China cannot maintain their double digit growth continuously. However, even when growth comes down to seven per cent because the economy is so large, growth is more in dollar terms than what 13 per cent growth was 20 years ago.

I am not quite sure about the future of manufacturing. With the increasing onset of robotics, manufacturing as we have known as a labour intensive activity is becoming less and less relevant. On top of that we have the political backlash of many countries, which

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want to have their jobs back, those outsourced to other parts of the world. To keep focusing on manufacturing, when on one hand jobs are being taken back rather than exported and on the other hand jobs are being done by robots, who can do any repetitive manufacturing much better and cheaper, we need to really rethink our strategy. I have been saying that "Make in India", Mr Modi's very famous slogan, needs calibration because many products that were manufactured in India 20 years ago may not necessarily be made in India today. There are many other options and we have not even touched on artificial intelligence, which is also replacing human workers.

The strength of countries such as India and Sri Lanka will lie much more in the three broad sectors of services, tourism and hospitality, and the knowledge industry. These are areas in which having able, skilled and affordable opportunities will attract the rest of the world.

If you take something such as, in the case of Sri Lanka, the burgeoning tourism industry, I am sure that you will go well beyond the 2.2 million tourists you now receive. What we all often forget is that an investment of USD 1,000 on tourism, employs eight times more people than the same investment of USD 1,000 in manufacturing sector. If we are talking about manufacturing because we want to employ more people, we could actually be talking more productively about the tourism industry. That is just one example but there are many more industries that we can look at. In India for example I would place emphasis on the growth of Ayurveda, yoga and such wellness activities, which will attract tourists to come. There are Ayurvedic resorts mushrooming across Kerala, which employ people they generate revenues and they provide a service that is not available in the Western world. Those are the areas that we can do much better at.

What is the role of India in the global economy?

At the moment it is a very modest role, we are still under three per cent of global exports, but it is growing. In the last 25 years we have become much more globalised. India was a very protected economy, where barriers kept out the international capitalist system. Today it seems that we do have a far more globally integrated economy. Our strengths are mainly in services and IT – this is quite significant, there was a global event, the Y2K fear, when people were afraid that computers around the world would crash on January 1, 2000 because they were programmed for two digits and not four. At that point the huge effort made by Indian software engineers around the world to recalibrate the operating systems suddenly woke up the world to the potential of computer services from India.

I feel that we have to keep up with our skills. I am truly concerned that the skills we are marketing to the world will themselves become out of date with the advent of artificial intelligence. There is new technology even in computers and software that we have perhaps not kept up with. It seems to me that if we want to be world leaders in technology and computer software, then we have to keep up. Things are changing at a dizzying speed every where in the world.

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Despite what I said earlier, I would like to think that we can still make a difference in manufacturing. India has a peculiar problem, we have 65 per cent of our population under 35 years. According to the estimates of the ILO, we would have 116 million people by the year of 2020 between the ages of 19 and 23, which is the job-starting age group. China will have only 94 million; we would be a good quarter more in terms of the number of people. This means a youthful and skilled, dynamic and energetic workforce that could be the engine of the world economy; in the manner in which China was in the preceding generation.

The flip side of that is – have we equipped these young children to do that? for them to take advantage of the opportunities available? Are they trained and educated adequately? Are they able to take on skilled or semi-skilled employment? I am sorry to say that at the moment the majority of the Indians are not.

How do you think Sri Lanka is positioned?

Sri Lanka has some obvious advantages; blessed by nature and now with peace and stability, which is very important. Tourism is growing in leaps and bounds. More and more people are discovering Sri Lanka and therefore you definitely acquire a certain level of global recognition. Beyond that, Sri Lanka also has its position right in the heart of the Indian Ocean, which explains the phenomenal growth of the Colombo Port. Some of us as Indian politicians are worried about that because 80 per cent of India's container traffic comes directly from the Colombo Port. That is certainly high; while we value what Colombo Port is doing we need our Indian ports to take on some of this traffic as well. But Sri Lanka has many advantages; It is right in the middle, between Dubai and Singapore. Sri Lanka can truly focus on a Port economy as it were. In terms of facilitating traffic, the country seems to be keeping up by developing port infrastructure and facilities. Chinese involvement is there because there are goods transiting through Sri Lanka on their way to China as well as India.

I do not want to claim to know more about Sri Lanka than I do. I would not be able to say much about the status of Sri Lanka's progress in the knowledge industries and IT sector. I hope that Sri Lanka would explore some of its complementarities with the Indian economy



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without feeling intimidated by their neighbour. I am eagerly looking forward to the day when Sri Lankan entrepreneurs will have the courage to realise that Sri Lanka will be a very good base to leap into the Indian market rather than fearing somehow that a FTA would be a one sided affair. Surely Sri Lanka has much to offer that Indian consumers need.

What is the relationship between India and China today?

It has unfortunately not been ideal. At the time my party – the UPA had formed the government, we had a modus operandi where trade kept growing dramatically and the many political issues were kept on the back burner. There were two main political issues; one being the long standing unresolved frontier dispute, which is in fact the world's longest, in terms of duration and also length of an undemarcated frontier, and the second issue was seen as China's continued support and encouragement of Pakistan at a time that Pakistan was abetting or refusing to curb terrorist attacks on India from its soil. These two aspects did cause strain on the relationship, but they were kept on the back burner during the UPA government. They have now again emerged. We are seeing in today's context a lot of unpleasantness around these two issues.

Then, we also have the China – Pakistan Economic Corridor, which runs through a territory that China itself acknowledges is disputed. This has caused great tension with India. In a different world India might have been interested in cooperating with the CPEC itself.

The dramatic progress in trade relations, which went from barely a quarter of a billion dollars to 70 billion dollars a year in one generation (in about 25 years from the early 90s), an increase of 250 times, now seems to have hit a plateau. The UPA government had spoken about targeting a 100 billion dollars, but we have not really broken through the 70 billion dollar mark. So I am hoping all of this will be transformed.

The present Indian government has opened the investment portals to China. It has said that all the restrictions that were maintained on Chinese investments on sensitive sectors such as ports, telecom and so on have now been lifted and China can invest in any sector.

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If China was to come in and invest in a substantial way that might help change the atmosphere and relieve some of the tensions. If China develops a great stake in the Indian economy then they will probably have a very peaceful relationship with India, where both will prosper.

Can you tell us about India's role in Asia?

Since 1991, from the time of Prime Minister Narasimha Rao, India has been much more conscious about its role and responsibilities in Asia than ever before. It has excellent relations and a free trade agreement with ASEAN. It has bilateral economic cooperation agreements with a number of large Asian countries such as Korea, Japan and so on. We are looking actively at wooing Japanese investment. India is also a member of the East Asian Summit; even if it is difficult by any stretch for the geopolitical imagination to see India as an East Asian country, it is nonetheless a member of this organisation. All of this suggests that Asia is looming large in India's conscience. There are efforts to revive the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), which connects the South Asian countries with Thailand and Myanmar; this is seen as potentially very promising.

There is also West Asia. India has also strengthened its relationships significantly with the Gulf countries and the West Asian countries, which are simultaneously a source of energy security, providing opportunities for Indian workers to find good jobs and send remittances. They have been a playing field for big Indian companies, many of which originated in those parts of the world. Several of the Indian billionaires made their fortunes in that region. The West Asian countries according to me are potentially significant sources of investment for India. However, this hasn't happened yet but could happen. For all these reasons both East and West Asia are very important to India.

India, as it is located in the heart of Asia is therefore required to be very conscious of its identification with Asia. Central Asia also needs to be developed in terms of our involvement. The continuous troubles we have with Pakistan and Afghanistan have restricted our access to Central Asia, but the potential is high. In South



Asia we are all frustrated with the issues that have bedeviled SAARC and I certainly hope that we can strengthen this organisation – or if not, then our bilateral relationships with individual members.

Do countries in Asia, say for example SAARC countries, lose their growth momentum when they have too much democracy?

No, I do not believe in that. Democracy is about honouring individuals of our society. Who are we to presume that others do not need their freedom and value only our own? None of the leaders that preach that you require authoritarian methods to get things done would like it if those methods were applied to themselves. We should accept that democracy is about respecting the rights of other human beings, autonomy and freedom. But it should not necessarily translate to inefficiency.

I often argued in the Indian context that our inefficiencies having nothing to do with democracy. We blame them on democracy but

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it is the kind of democracy that we have chosen that has made us inefficient.

If you look at China that isn't a democracy, a businessman who wants to invest has to go and meet a Mayor of a town and explain to him what he wants to do and the extent of land that he requires, access to roads and ports and the number of employees he requires, and also infrastructure such as electricity and water. The Mayor alone can grant him every single thing that he requires to set up his business. In India, in total contrast, the town Mayor has absolutely no power. He is a glorified chairman of a powerless committee. And neither he nor the committee can deliver any of these things. Everything that the businessman requires will entail multiple processes and actors. This kind of situation is not called a democracy, it is inefficiency.

There are democracies where you can organise yourself to have a directly elected Mayor who has defined powers and budgetary authority. Let him or her be elected for a fixed

term and be accountable to the voters after that. We do not need to have so many checks and balances, so that we have to look over ourselves all the time.

Democracy is not the actual problem; it is the manner in which we practice our democracy. But democracy is as fundamental as respecting the rights of other human beings and where I am concerned that is not negotiable.

What can you tell us about your experience in the UN, you were the Under-Secretary General at one time?

I had a very lengthy career at the UN. Essentially there were four broad areas of experience that I had in the 29 years in the UN. I worked with the refugees, which was immensely interesting and rewarding. This included heading the Singapore office during the peak of the Vietnamese “boat people” crisis in the late 80s. Secondly, peace keeping at the end of the Cold War where I was in charge of the Yugoslav operations. With both of these professional experiences one had the feeling that one could place one's smudgy thumbprints on the footnotes of the pages of history, and that was a very satisfying experience.

Thirdly I worked in the Secretary General's Office when Kofi Annan was then the Secretary General. This gave me a global view as I joined him on his travels and meetings with global leaders. It was extraordinarily educative and mind opening. It gave me a good sense in the way in which the world worked in those days. My final stint, was heading, as Under Secretary - General, UN's Department of Communications and Public Information, which was the largest department in the organisation. We had a presence in 80 countries and 800 staff. At the same time we had budgetary restrictions and cuts when I had to reform the organization, which had to be done while keeping the morale of the staff.

I am proud to say that I had a career, which not only was satisfying in terms of my personal role but also gave me an opportunity to be at the cusp of some of the important events in the world at the end of the 20th Century and at the beginning of the 21st Century. I look back at that career with a great deal of satisfaction and passion, at the same time with a sense of the immense utility of the world organisation in an increasingly divided world.

Sri Lanka has been rebuilding effectively in the last few years. In my view the sky is the limit and it is a very blue sky indeed.

Are you in favour of demonetisation?

No I am extremely critical of it. It did not seem to hurt Mr Modi politically but it did hurt the economy. It at least cost India more than half a per cent of GDP growth in the quarter which it occurred. This will be confirmed further when the figures of the first quarter of this year are released. A number of our small and micro scale industries had to shut down. Daily wage workers have been thrown out of work. Short term costs have been colossal. India has tremendous resilience and it will recover but I do also wonder about the real justification for such a drastic step and really what it is going to achieve in the long term.

What motivates you?

A desire to make a difference. That is the only valid answer we can give – that we feel that our presence here makes a difference to people, society, and (the greatest ambition!) to history. If not, all that we can do is make our families and friends happy. We are all here to make a difference one way or the other and I have been trying to do that since my childhood.

Can you tell us about yourself?

I am a human being with a number of responses to the world, some of which are manifested in my work and in my writing. They are both parts of the same person and anyone who wants to appreciate me whole should look at my work as well as my writing. Because I am both.

Message to the readers?

We have tremendous potential, I am never in favour of those who despair and say things are bad. Things can always get better if you apply yourself with the will and at the same time have the confidence as well as apply the necessary creativity to opportunities when they arise and make them work for you.

Sri Lanka has a glowing future. 35 years ago you were poised at the brink of a take-off in the early 80s where unfortunately sectarian politics destroyed that dream.

However, without despairing, you should now rebuild the country. Sri Lanka has been rebuilding effectively in the last few years. In my view the sky is the limit and it is a very blue sky indeed. ☐