



## The Elephant, the Tiger, and the Cell Phone: Reflections on India, the Emerging 21st-Century Power

**Shashi Tharoor**

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### Introduction

**JOANNE MYERS:** Good morning. I'm Joanne Myers, Director of Public Affairs Programs. On behalf of the Carnegie Council, I would like to thank you all for joining us.

Today our guest is Shashi Tharoor. He will be discussing a wonderful book. It could be a travel guide to India or if you are not planning to go to India, it's a wonderful read. It's called [\*The Elephant, the Tiger, and the Cell Phone: Reflections on India, the Emerging 21st-Century Power\*](#).

I think most of us know Shashi and probably have been wondering what has happened to him since he left the United Nations. While his departure has signaled the passing of an era, his whereabouts have led to much speculation. Some reported sightings have placed him traveling incognito on the Indian subcontinent. Others say, "Not so," for they claim to have seen him traveling *sub rosa* on our own continent. Still others say that maybe neither of the above is true, but that he is simply secretly sequestered while preparing for the next chapter of his life.

Personally, I have a sneaking suspicion that he was recently spotted sitting on top of an *Elephant* while hunting *The Tigers* in Ramthambore National Park, and as could be predicted, he was overhead speaking ever so eloquently on his *Cell Phone*. [Laughter]

In all seriousness, this prolific and polished writer has been crisscrossing the globe with a special purpose in mind. The truth is, he has embarked on his first foray into the private sector. Now, as he marches in lockstep with his own native India, looking confidently toward the future, it is fortunate for us that he has still found the time to pursue his own special interests: public speaking on issues he cares about and composing witty and insightful articles about India.

Whether writing for the *Financial Times*, the *International Herald Tribune*, or even for his own amusement, I can assure you that Shashi has not lost any of the special gifts which we have all come to appreciate over the years—namely, a lyrical quality to his speech and the ability to clearly and concisely communicate ideas, which is all too rare a commodity today.

As many of you may have guessed, this time, in *The Elephant, the Tiger, and the Cell Phone*, Shashi once again artfully engages us with his writing. In a series of essays, all as diverse as this emerging 21st-century power, whose role in the world will surely be unique and important, he discusses the forces

that have made India what it is today. From the complexity of its politics to its burgeoning economy, from its kaleidoscopic culture to the importance of its cricket matches, he unravels the uniqueness that is the essence of India.

The latest book, like its author, is oriented toward the future, but one in which issues of history and identity make more than a passing appearance.

Please join me in welcoming the irresistible, the irrepressible, the indefatigable, definitely a man on the go, Shashi Tharoor.

## Remarks

**SHASHI THAROOR:** Thank you so much, Joanne, for that splendid introduction.

I must say, the one phrase I hope never to hear out of Joanne's lips here is "that speaker needs no introduction," because I think her introductions are the best part of being here.

Thank you so much for having me. It's wonderful to see so many old friends from my own frequent visits to the audience of these remarkable breakfasts. I am delighted to be able to present a book to you that Joanne has introduced so stimulatingly that I want to read it, too, now. Thank you, Joanne.

Let me tackle it right away from the title, because I know that it raised a few eyebrows.

The elephant and the tiger, I am afraid, are part of the wonderful penchant for stereotype that we have about India. The truth is that for a long time, India has been sort of seen as this elephant, this ponderous, slumbering, lumbering beast, slow to move, covered in flies and dust, and not really doing much more than plodding on through the forest. But over the last few years—the last decade and a half, more or less—we seem to have seen this slumbering elephant beginning to acquire the stripes of a lithe and sinewy and agile tiger. This transformation is a major theme of my book and of the kind of interest that people have begun to take in today's India.

That transformation, of course, is fundamentally economic. Why? Because when India became independent in 1947, our nationalist leaders came to power with a very different view of the world from what you in this country have grown up taking for granted. In the United States, you live in a society where capitalism is almost axiomatically associated with freedom. But for the Indian nationalists—and, I daresay, for most of the nationalists fighting colonial rule in many other parts of the world—capitalism was immediately associated with slavery. The [British East India Company](#) had come to trade and stayed on to rule.

So our nationalists were immediately suspicious of every foreigner with a briefcase, seeing him as the thin end of a new imperial wedge.

We then suffered, I must say, in India's case, for four and a half decades from what I call the economics of nationalism. The nationalists were convinced that the only way you could preserve your political independence was by ensuring your economic independence. So economic self-sufficiency became the mantra, and instead of inserting ourselves into the global capitalist system, we subtracted ourselves from it and threw up the protectionist barriers, and essentially attempted to do everything for ourselves, with the result that we put bureaucrats rather than businessmen on the commanding heights of the Indian economy and, frankly, spent 45 years regulating stagnation and distributing poverty.

This was, somewhat tongue-in-cheek, referred to by an Indian economist as "the Hindu rate of growth"—2.3-to-3 percent during all of these years, which, frankly, was a darn sight better than the 0.1 percent under the previous 100 years of British rule, but still was not good.

But the fact is that, as this carried on, India found itself really falling back, if you like, on the lead table of

global prosperity.

Then came a serious economic crisis, in 1991, when we were about to default on our payments. Actually, the government had to ship off the physical holdings of India's gold to London in order to provide security. It was a huge psychological, as well as financial, blow. India is a country where traditionally the gold in the family is almost equated with its honor. To see the gold of the country being shipped off to London was really, I think, the last straw, and a reformist administration under [Narasimha Rao](#) and [Manmohan Singh](#), then finance minister, began to liberalize the economy and take advantage of the opportunities that globalization was beginning to offer—opportunities, of course, that China had already taken advantage of 15 years earlier, but that India had been slower to do.

The transformation that this brought about was extremely significant.

The third element of my title is the cell phone. I put that in for a very simple reason. The cell phone is, to me, the instrument that perhaps is the most significant emblem, the most appropriate metaphor, for this transformation. The fact is that the cell phone has stood for this transformation that I have talked about in ways that almost nothing else can.

When I left India to come to graduate studies in this country, there must have been about 600 million people, and there were 2 million landline telephones. By the time this liberalization began in 1991, there were probably 800 million people and there were 8 million landline telephones. But what was worse was that you could pick up those telephones and not get a dial tone or you could dial a number and stumble onto somebody else's conversation—what we always called in India a cross-connection. It certainly was a connection that made everybody very cross. [Laughter]

On top of that, you would wait two and a half hours to get a trunk call, as it was called, from Bombay or Calcutta to Delhi. Indeed, you could pay a premium in order to get something called a lightning call, which meant you could call Delhi within half an hour instead of two and a half hours.

This was the sort of thing. When a member of Parliament stood up and attacked this appalling practice of what was, after all, a government monopoly, as our telephones were, Mrs. [Indira Gandhi's](#) communications minister, a gentleman called C.M. Stephen, stood up in Parliament—as late as 1984—and replied in a lordly manner that telephones were a luxury in a developing country, that the government had no obligation to provide them or improve the service, and that if the honorable member didn't like his telephone, he could return it, because there was an eight-year-long waiting list of people to get landlines.

That was the reality of India, and, quite frankly, that was the attitude that governed us.

From that India, we now see an India where, as I wrote in the book when it went to press in April of 2007, the Indian public had just set a world record, in April of 2007, by buying 7 million cell phones.

The book went to press. It has now emerged. It is available for all of you.

Last month, India sold 8.5 million cell phones. So not only has the world record been beaten, but, of course, what this epitomizes is both the breathtaking nature of this change, the rapidity of it, and at the same time, the change of attitude implicit in all of this. The government has gone from the kind of comment that Minister Stephen was guilty of to one in which the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India is considered one of the more enlightened regulatory bodies in the telecom business anywhere in the world.

Even more significant—and that is an important point to underscore—it isn't just the fact that the numbers have gone up and the attitudes have changed; it's who has these cell phones today. The answer is, very ordinary people. People are buying these cell phones who would not have put themselves on those eight-year-long waiting lists in those bad old days. If you travel to India today, your chauffeur is bound to have a cell phone. If you are visiting a friend in a suburb of one of India's cities, you will find we have this marvelous service on the side streets of the suburbs where a fellow wheels a big cart with a

coal-fired iron that irons your clothes for you. He has a cell phone, so he knows who has clothes to give him to iron. Fisher folk have cell phones; farmers have cell phones.

The cell phone has empowered the Indian underclass in ways that 45 years of cant about socialism had never actually done. That transformation, to me, is one of the reasons why this book is called *The Elephant, the Tiger, and the Cell Phone*.

But having said that, obviously, that alone is not what the book is all about. It occupies a chunk of the book, a section called "The Transformation of India." But as those who know my writing and my preoccupations and those of you who might know my previous book about India, [India from Midnight to the Millennium](#), which was published on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of India's independence, and which was a more comprehensive look at India's society, politics, culture, economics, in the first 50 years of independence—this book doesn't seek to be comprehensive, but it does attempt to touch on various aspects of Indian life, as Joanne so evocatively described.

There is an entire section called "Ideas of Indianness," which returned to my preoccupations with India's diversity and its management of its pluralism that, to me, are at the heart of what India is all about and why India is worth being interested in.

To me, one of the striking things about India is, in fact, that it's not *e pluribus unum*. If we borrowed that motto, it would have to be something like *e pluribus plurimum*, because in India it's very many Indias, all at the same time. Churchill once barked that India is merely a geographical expression. "It is no more a country than the equator," he said. Churchill was rarely right about India, but it is true that there is no other country in the world that embraces this extraordinary mixture of ethnic groups, the varieties of topography and climate, the profusion of mutually incomprehensible languages, and at the same time, the diversity of religious and cultural practices—and, for that matter, the ranges of economic development. We really live in all centuries at once in India. That, too, is part of what the Indian experience is all about.

How does India manage this diversity? This has been something that has intrigued me a lot, particularly when the pluralism of India, which I have celebrated in some of my earlier writings, has become contested in recent years, with the rise of a Hindu chauvinist political movement in India in the last two decades. In defining my own positions about these in columns I have written in the Indian press, I found myself engaging with Indian readers. Some of these exchanges and some of my repeated scratching at this itch of "Indianness" you will find in this book.

But let me explain why I think this is of interest. I think it's of interest because India is probably the most diverse country on the planet. But it has managed to endure differences of caste, creed, color, culture, cuisine, conviction, consonant, costume, and custom, and still rally around a consensus. That consensus is actually around the rather simple democratic principle that in a diverse democracy like India, you don't really need to agree all the time, so long as you will agree on the basic ground rules of how you will disagree.

This meant that India has been able to maintain consensus for the longest time on how to manage without consensus.

When I speak to American audiences, I rather enjoy telling them that you may be a melting pot; we are not. What we are is a *thali*. A *thali*, if you haven't been to an Indian restaurant, is a large stainless steel plate with a number of different dishes on it, each in different bowls. Because they are in different bowls, they don't necessarily flow into the next. But they belong together on that steel plate, and they combine on your palate to give you a satisfying repast.

That ultimately is, for me, a more useful metaphor for the Indian plural experience. Ultimately, most Indians have fundamental differences, differences as great as those, for example, between the various European countries, and yet we are way ahead of where the European Union is in terms of the political

unity and a shared, common cultural and political experience, and now, of course, economic experience.

I can give you a couple of examples of what this means in practice. Eleven years ago, when we celebrated the 49th anniversary of India's independence, our then-prime minister, a man called [Deve Gowda](#), stood at the ramparts of Delhi's 16th-century Red Fort and delivered his Independence Day address to the nation in Hindi, India's so-called national language. Eight other prime ministers had done the same thing 48 times before him. But what was unusual this time was that Deve Gowda, a southerner from the state of Karnataka, delivered a speech in Hindi, a language of which he did not know a word. Tradition in politics required a speech in Hindi, because it was the national language, so he gave one. But the words were written out for him in his native Kannada script, in which, of course, they made no sense.

Such an episode is almost inconceivable anywhere else in the world, but it encapsulates the best of the oddities that help make India, India. Only in India could you have a prime minister who doesn't speak the national language. Only, for that matter, in India is there a national language that half the population doesn't speak. Only in India, perhaps, could this particular solution have been found to enable the prime minister to address his people.

We have this long tradition of playback singing in Bollywood. I don't know how many of you are aware of this. When you see a Bollywood movie, all of which are musicals, of course, the actors are only lip-synching. There are professional singers behind them singing. Not all the professional singers are native Hindi speakers. I knew one, a Keralite by the name of [K.J. Yesudas](#). I saw his songbook. He had sung his way to number 1 on a number of the Hindi music charts, but in his songbook, the lyrics he was singing had been written out for him in the Malayalam script for him to sing, Malayalam being his mother tongue and as different in terms of script and language as Russian is from English—more so, really, because at least you have some letters that resemble each other; we have none amongst our various scripts.

To see this practice elevated to the prime ministerial address of Independence Day was a startling affirmation of Indian pluralism—because, you see, ultimately, we are all minorities in India. That's what makes India so interesting. There is no such thing as the typical Indian or the average Indian. In fact, the old cliché that "anything you can say about India, the opposite is also true," holds very true even about anybody whom you can think of as an archetypal Indian.

These extraordinary differences of language, of region, of caste, and so on have meant that everybody has something that sets him or her so far apart from everyone else that we have simply learned to live with difference in our daily existence. To me, that's rather striking.

But what is even more valuable is the way in which democracy has helped manage that diversity. What you have seen through democracy is a situation in which some of the very necessary and dramatic social transformations in India have occurred not with the kind of violent upheaval that would have been necessary in some other societies, but through a process of give and take and exchange in this pluralist democracy. For example, today, in our most populous state, the state of Uttar Pradesh, which, if it were independent, would be the fifth-largest country in the world—185 million people—that state now has a chief minister, the equivalent of an American governor, who is an Untouchable woman, a woman from the Dalit community. That is something that would have been inconceivable for 3,000 years before independence. But this society, which had so badly treated both women and Untouchables, has found itself, through the democratic process, the use of the ballot to help empower people by their numbers, in this extraordinary political result in northern India.

This is a lady, [Mayawati](#), whom you will be hearing more of, because she is going to be a crucial player, I have no doubt, after the next general elections in the country, when a new government is going to be formed, because she is almost certain to control a significant block of members of Parliament next time.

So there is one example of a transformation.

Earlier we had the so-called "Backward Classes." The Untouchables are outcasts, but the lower castes had already done this in a number of states, from Bihar to Tamil Nadu, coming to power through the ballot box, through empowering themselves by organizing themselves politically to get these votes.

These transformations, I think, are particularly interesting, and they go to the heart of what India is all about.

Three years ago, after the largest single exercise in democratic franchise anywhere in the world—but then every Indian general election is the largest single exercise in democratic franchise anywhere in the world, last time with 650 million voters; next time, it may be closer to 700 million—after that election and the results came out, we had the extraordinary phenomenon of a female political leader who is a Roman Catholic of Italian background, [Sonia Gandhi](#), winning the election and making way for a Sikh, Manmohan Singh, to be sworn in as prime minister by a Muslim, President [Abdul Kalam](#), in a country 81 percent Hindu.

Not only was this an absolutely astonishing revelation of the way in which India's diversity functions, but I love telling this in this country, the world's oldest democracy, which, for the last 220 years, hasn't yet managed to elect a president or a vice president who is anything but white, male, and Christian. Maybe you folks have something to learn from this tumultuous democracy halfway across the globe.

So that is a second chunk of the book. I am not speaking in terms of the order—I think it appears earlier in this edition—but ideas of Indianness and pluralism which engage me a great deal.

There is one section of sort of mini-biographies of Indian figures, not just political ones, ranging from a short essay on [Gandhi](#) and [Nehru](#) together (because I already published a full-length biography of Nehru a few years ago, which I hope you will dip into as well)—a shorter assessment of their contributions to India—ranging from them to the mathematician [Ramanujan](#), a great genius who died of English cold and English diet in the early 1920s, a great genius lost to the world of mathematics.

These little biographies are based on the simple principle that to write a book that speaks of India in the 21st century, one can't ignore the great figures of the 20th century who helped shape the India that exists today.

The remaining two sections are really collections of vignettes of Indians at work and at play. These are really little pieces—some of them began life as op-eds—which talk about everything. Joanne mentioned cricket; there are a couple of pieces on that.

Writers rarely admit that there are lines they wish they had written, but one that I begin one of my essays with is attributable to Indian sociologist [Ashis Nandy](#), who said that cricket is actually an Indian game accidentally discovered by the British. That really is a profoundly cutting insight, and I explain why in the course of the book.

There are also essays on our penchant for taking too many holidays. There are more official holidays in India than any other country in the world. That is one of the flip sides of our diversity. We celebrate everybody's religious holidays.

Then to our disgraceful habit of renaming our cities, on which there is a 1,500-word rant in the book. I grew up in Bombay, and I'm tired of people telling me I have to call it Mumbai. "Bangalore" became a verb in Webster's Collegiate Dictionary. To be "Bangalored" was to have your job outsourced. But that no longer exists in India. It's Bengaluru, which was, apparently, the original name, "the city of boiled beans"—that's what it means—rather than India's "Silicon Plateau."

So I have a rant about that.

I even have a slightly more disbelieving piece about our habit of even changing our names. We have a



very senior politician, chief minister of a state—and a fairly successful state in South India—who added an "a" to the spelling of her name because a numerologist told her she had to. The fact is that this sort of thing, which seems impossible in most modern civilized democracies, is entirely practiced in India, because the hold of traditional astrology on people's imaginations is so real.

I have a glossary in the book called "The A to Z of Being Indian," in which I point out, under the entry on astrology, that an Indian without a horoscope is like an American without a credit card and is subject to many of the same disadvantages in life. You certainly can't get a spouse without one. You might be able to rent a car, but I'm not sure.

The fact is that there are aspects of Indian culture and society that still, perhaps, are unfamiliar to people elsewhere. I have talked about those. I have talked about Bollywood and so on. The glossary is where I am going to end this talk so we can have more of an exchange together.

It was an attempt, really, to do something—I found myself chatting to an Irish friend who had lived in England pretty much all his adult life. I said, "So what is being British all about?"

He replied without batting an eyelid, "Cricket, Shakespeare, the BBC."

I asked myself, could we do that about India? I realized there wasn't a three-word formula I could possibly come up with that could encapsulate so much of the richness of being Indian as that formula did about Britain. I also realized that, in fact, 30 words wouldn't capture it either.

So I ended up doing a 30-page glossary, some of it very tongue-in-cheek and some of it not so, about all the shared assumptions, particularly the cultural assumptions, that go into making India. That is what concludes the book. I will read you a couple of minor excerpts from it, just to anchor this in the book.

The very first entry is the Ambassador car: The classic symbol of India's post-independence industrial development, outdated even when new, inefficient and clumsy, wasteful of steel and gas, overpriced and overweight, with a steering mechanism like an oxcart and a frame like a tank's. Ambassador cars dominated Indian routes for decades, protected and patronized in the name of self-reliance. Foreigners were constantly amazed that this graceless contraption of quite spectacular ugliness enjoyed two-year waiting lists at all the dealers right up to the 1990s. What they didn't realize was that if they had to drive on Indian roads and in Indian traffic conditions, they would have preferred Ambassadors, too.

Perhaps slightly more attempted seriousness, the Taj Mahal, for example: The motif for India on countless tourist posters, it has probably had more camera shutters clicked at it than any other edifice on the face of this earth. How easily one forgets that this unequal monument of love is, in fact, a tomb, the burial place of a woman who suffered 13 times the pain of childbirth and died in agony in the 14th attempt. Perhaps that makes it all the more appropriate as a symbol of India, a land of beauty and grandeur amid suffering and death.

I mention that because, of course, I have probably left you the impression that this is a book that does nothing but celebrate and boost the positives about India. I have to say that I am very conscious of the negatives. We have, as a result of these economic transformations, more billionaires in India than in any other country in Asia—more than in Japan, for instance—but we also have 260 million people living on the wrong side of the poverty line. This is not the [UN](#) or [World Bank](#) poverty line of \$1.00 a day; it's a poverty line drawn just this side of the funeral pyre. It's 360 rupees a month, or 30 cents a day, that these people live on. They live with chronic hunger, malnourishment, lack of health care, and horrendous conditions.

We have all the world records I mentioned on cell phones. We also have the world record for farmer suicides. Last year, several thousand farmers committed suicide after the monsoons failed and they were simply unable to bear the crippling burden of debt they have.

We have the world's second-largest pool of trained scientists and engineers, many of whom, as you know, have been starting firms in Silicon Valley. But we also have more children in India who have not seen the inside of a school than in any other country in the world.

So these are real problems.

You only have to fly into an Indian airport to see how far we have to go in improving our infrastructure. The tenth-best Chinese airport will be better than the best Indian one. Our ports, our roads, our airports—our physical infrastructure is creaking and in desperate need of attention.

Then there's the sort of software of human development. Food, health care, the sanitation, and, above all, education remain major, major areas of attention in which we have a long way to go.

I didn't want to end without pointing out that I am conscious of all of this and that India has major challenges to reach. But I thought I should leave some things to talk about during our question-and-answer exchange.

Thank you.

JOANNE MYERS: Definitely vintage Shashi. It's nice to have you back.

### Questions and Answers

**QUESTION:** I am curious about Shashi's attitude toward the British Raj. Was this a purely predatory relationship? I suppose one could say that. Clearly, if you take "Shakespeare, cricket, and the BBC," the language of Shakespeare since his death has seldom been so beautifully modulated as we read and hear it done by Shashi. The BBC—almost every time you switch it on, you can hear him talking about something or other. [Laughter]

As for cricket, it's clear that we have let down what we thought was our national game. It's really only in India and the neighboring countries that cricket receives the honor due to it.

Of course, if you look at British public life today, people of Indian origin and many aspects of Indian culture are the richest and most exciting aspects of it.

I don't know about that 0.1 percent. Was that just that we were very successful predators, or was it typical British incompetence? [Laughter]

**SHASHI THAROOR:** Oh, I don't know. Actually, Britain proved itself particularly competent in taking over a country 25 times its own size, with barely 100,000 British troops at any one time in India.

I have to say that the relationship was largely predatory. In fact, it went right back to the 18th century, when the East India Company came for essentially commercial motives, but the so-called nabobs, as the British called them—which is a transmutation of the Indian word *nawab*—East India Company officials essentially looted everything they could lay their hands on, went back home and bought rotten boroughs and set themselves up in grand manor houses in the English countryside.

[Robert Clive](#), the great British hero of the first major battle of 1757, the [Battle of Plassey](#), was one such example. The British had the gall to call him "Clive of India," as if he belonged to the country, when all he had really done was to ensure that much of the country belonged to him.

As I asked [Niall Ferguson](#) when he came here and talked about empire in those lyrical terms, in this very room, some years ago, whose benefit was this about? There is no question that it was for the benefit of the British public, the British elite, and the British economy. We had, indeed, the English language



introduced after the [Macaulay reforms of 1835](#), but for the explicit purpose not of providing education to the masses, but of creating a small class of interpreters, as it were, between the rulers and the ruled.

What Indians were able to take for themselves from English education they did. They set up their own institutions. They spent their own money going off and studying in England and so on. But they were certainly not encouraged.

Cricket, yes, I grant you that the only reason that we have this wonderful sport in India is the presence of the British. But once again, the British brought it in to play amongst themselves, and finally they had to use Indians for some of the more menial tasks around. The Indians then became rather good at these tasks—fetching and carrying the ball, and bowling it—and decided to start playing it themselves. That, too, transformed itself.

The railways were a British contribution, but they were essentially used to extract Indian resources and ship them to the ports to be sent off to England.

Indian traditional manufactures, cotton and silk, were systemically destroyed by the British in order to permit Lancashire, instead, to sell its products to the Indian market, rather than Indians doing it themselves. In one horrific episode—fortunately, not widely repeated—a number of weavers of fine Indian cloth were rounded up and had their thumbs cut off so that they couldn't actually compete with British manufacturers.

Colonialism was not a pretty thing. I think one has to say that it is, to some degree, to the credit of both the British and the Indians that it ended in the way it did, and with the lack of bitterness that one might otherwise have expected to see—partially because what Gandhi demonstrated through his movement was that the British were decent enough to be shamed by their own brutality. It was that process of shaming the colonizer that essentially made British rule untenable. That wouldn't have happened if, for example, we had had the Nazis ruling instead of the British.

So to that degree, all credit to the British for having had the decency to recognize what they were doing. They didn't shoot Gandhi. They jailed him and allowed him to become a martyr and got humiliated by him time after time after time, and finally gave up the ghost.

The other point worth making, though, is that India, too, is a forgiving society. Indians have this very, very strong identification with the good things of Britain, particularly British culture. British literature is, I daresay, more read these days in India than in Britain. I think there will always be a certain affinity that comes that way.

But on economics, 0.1 percent is a figure confirmed by British economists. Colonialism was a completely profitable exercise—not just, by the way, from loot and rapine, which occurred with depressing familiarity and frequency, but even from taxes. The Indian taxpayer and Indian revenues—excise, import, and income tax, though income tax was very limited—actually paid more to the British than the British spent in administering their empire in India. So every year there was a net outflow from India to the British economy.

All of these are facts that can be looked up. I assure you that they are accurate.

**QUESTION:** I'm from Ireland. Don't worry, I'm not going to go where you have just been. [Laughter]

But maybe one of the things that the British in our case deserve credit for—one of several and many—is, very many years after our independence, we came into membership of the European Union and we were able to exploit, if you like, and profit from that. One of the essential tools that we had was a legacy that the British left behind in Ireland, and that was an independent and professional civil service, which was at the core of our national absorption into the European Union, which transformed us.

Churchill's comment reminded me of somebody I once heard describe India as "a civilization masquerading as a country," which I thought fitted very well the description you have given us.

I had a lecturer in college who used to divide the world into two groups of countries, Shashi. There were those that were politics-surplus and those that were politics-deficit. A politics-surplus country he described as one that produced more politics than it could consume domestically. [Laughter]

I think India certainly fits into that. I think most countries do.

The question I have has to do with, if you like, India's second tryst with destiny, and that is precisely the impact it is making as a result of its emergence onto the world stage, transformed and enlarged. It strikes me sometimes that India is like a large vessel coming into a confined harbor, in the sense that there is limited space for big brutes around the world, for big beasts on the world stage, and here is one, at a time when more than one is emerging. India certainly is doing that, and it is creating waves.

If you look at the impact from climate change, from the way in which the American government has sought to embrace India on the nuclear front, even in respect of Burma and the regional and continental dimension of that and of the regional Asian powers' disposition and posture towards what has happened in Burma, even in terms of your own immediate neighbors—I heard an Indian spokesman recently speak of Pakistan as a failed state. Even allowing for the element of *Schadenfreude* and that generation, it's a very serious situation, that.

The impact of India, a self-confident India, to quote Shakespeare, bestriding the stage as a colossus—what do you think of its impact, both in your own neck of the woods and, more widely, on the global level?

**SHASHI THAROOR:** Before I answer that, let me acknowledge very much what you said about the civil service, which was indeed a valuable British contribution, which has helped sustain India's development—and indeed the armed forces, which are very much modeled on the British Indian Army that was left behind and which have been an important force, as well, for national unity in India.

So there have been some good things, but I wasn't going to mention them to the questioner. [Laughter]

On your question of the impact of India on the world, it's striking that, in fact, India's greatest impact was probably in the first ten years after independence, or the first 15, when it actually didn't have this kind of contribution to make in economics or anything else. It was, in fact, a country in pretty grim shape.

But the articulation by Nehru, in the wake of Gandhi, of a vision of the world and of human affairs that seemed to inspire respect around the planet was, at that point, seen as India's major contribution. The invention of nonalignment, the refusal to take sides in the [Cold War](#), the articulation of an alternative view that was neither axiomatically connecting India as a democracy to other democracies nor axiomatically connecting India to the anti-Western camp, but trying to steer a course between them, gave India, for example, an opportunity to play a very constructive role in various issues, from Indochina in the early 1950s to the [Suez crisis](#), the [Bandung Conference](#), all of that.

India has fallen down a long way since then. First of all, the gap between the kind of Indian habit of conducting international diplomacy as a sort of moralistic running commentary on world affairs and the reality of India's own sufferings and poverty and so on—that certainly became a problem. In fact, I remember an Indian diplomat of that vintage telling me, in the 1970s—he has long since passed away now—that Indian diplomacy is like the lovemaking of an elephant. He said, "It is conducted at a very high level, accompanied by much bellowing, and the results are not known for two years." [Laughter]

I might add that you can probably apply that metaphor to Indian economic reform today, but that might be another story.

So there was a bit of a decline, I think, in Indian standing. Nonalignment, too, became seen as more and more reflexively anti-West and pro-Soviet. It lost a bit of credit in the world. Over the years, I would say that India's influence, in some ways, declined rather than grew since then.

Today, of course, the fact that India is beating some of its age-old problems, the fact that it is—even though what I mentioned about poverty is true, we are still pulling 1 percent of our population out of poverty every year. It's not enough. But all of these transformations make India a country that people are willing to sit up and listen to.

How does that impact? You asked about our neighborhood. India has actually had a fairly ambivalent role in our neighborhood. We have had this long traditional attitude that we don't interfere in the internal affairs of other countries. So the attitude has been that, as far as our neighborhood is concerned, we might utter ritual pieties about democracy, but we don't actually do anything very much to ensure that democracy is promoted.

We have seen, perhaps, a little bit more than that in Nepal recently, where we have helped steer the monarchy in that direction. But in Bangladesh, for example, where the democratic political leaders have been locked up, India has certainly made public noises about that but has certainly not done anything tangibly to show the regime in Bangladesh that India disapproves—so it probably doesn't disapprove.

You mentioned Myanmar. Myanmar is a curious story. I wrote about it in one of my columns a few weeks ago. After the crackdown in 1988 and then the elections in 1991, India was the only country that actually gave refuge to the student leaders who had to flee the generals' crackdown. It gave them safe haven, gave them support, gave them the resources to start a radio station and a newspaper, and so on.

Putting it bluntly, what happened was that China and Pakistan, our two sort of friendly neighbors, promptly moved into the space India had vacated in Burma and began developing very close relations with the generals, whom we had antagonized by supporting their opponents. After some years of seeing both China and Pakistan get major new advantages out of this relationship—economic advantages, military advantages, a naval base in one case, a new implantation of the Pakistan Inter-Services Intelligence on a flank that was seen, in some ways, as India's soft underbelly, and so on—India began to feel that it couldn't afford to pursue an idealistic foreign policy. The onset of natural resources, with Burma becoming a major supplier of natural gas, also became a factor.

President [Musharraf](#) traveled to Burma, and the Indian foreign minister, [Jaswant Singh](#), came hot on his heels. The net result has been that India has reoriented its policy and has decided it has to live with this regime, which is there in its neighborhood. You can't pick your neighbors. You work with them. And that's exactly what India has done.

Its commentary on what has happened in Myanmar in recent weeks has been less than, shall we say, democratic zealotry might otherwise recommend.

I wrote in my column that clearly this is a policy conducted from the head rather than from the heart. But perhaps in doing so, we have lost a little bit of our soul. We are not standing for principles in the world, in the way in which Nehru would have been proud of standing for. But that, too, may be a healthy practice. It may be that this sort of realism in Indian policy will be an international counterpart to the realism it's finally showing in economic policy at home.

When you speak of making a global impact, India feels it is a good citizen of the world by its participation in UN activities, UN peacekeeping, and all of that. But beyond that, the Security Council reform proposal seems to be going nowhere. The air may have gone out of the balloon, for a while anyway. I think India will just continue tending its own garden for a while yet.

**QUESTION:** Shashi, I want to ask you about something you may not cover in the book, because it may

be too contemporary. It is a very interesting subject, and that is relations between the United States and India.

The Bush administration, in what I think it can cite and be recognized as one of its successes in foreign policy, has made a totally new relationship between the United States and India. It has been [led](#) by [Nick Burns](#), the under secretary of state for political affairs, one of the few realists in the State Department who has had sway in this administration.

It is based on a nuclear deal, which has been much criticized outside of India. Now that it's sort of coming to fruition, it is being resisted within India by people who criticized the very nuclear deal that the Bush administration thought was a pretty sweet deal for the Indians.

What is going on with American relations and India?

**SHASHI THAROOR:** A good question. Thank you.

You are right; I'm afraid it is too contemporary to feature in this book, though the fact of the deal itself, the first step, was actually in 2005, when Manmohan Singh came to Washington.

Very briefly, for those of you who have not been following this as closely as the questioner, India never signed a [nuclear nonproliferation treaty](#), for what I consider the excellent reason that it's a discriminatory treaty. It's sort of apartheid in the international legal system. Five countries say they have something that nobody else can have, and that is morally, ethically, and in every other way unacceptable for any self-respecting country to agree to. But, in fact, most of the countries in the world accepted it and signed the treaty. India, Pakistan, Israel are amongst the few countries that have refused to sign the nuclear nonproliferation treaty.

But having refused to sign that treaty, India nonetheless exploded in 1998, under the previous government, a nuclear device and promptly had sanctions slapped on it, with the result that right now Indian nuclear scientists can't get visas to 45 countries, including the United States. This state of nuclear pariah status is, quite frankly, at odds with the way in which India is otherwise respected and treated in the world at large.

So what the India-United States nuclear deal was all about was basically for the United States to recognize India's special status, and India, in turn, to enter the global nuclear system without signing the NPT [nuclear nonproliferation treaty]. The concessions that the United States gave were essentially that the United States would supply uranium to India for its civilian nuclear energy program. India would separate out its military weapons making from this. That is barely 20 percent of India's existing nuclear capacity, and it will dwindle to a smaller percentage of the projected future capacity. The rest would come under [IAEA](#) [International Atomic Energy Agency] safeguards.

So everyone saw this as a win-win. [Mohamed ElBaradei](#), head of IAEA, said this was an excellent thing, because it would basically bring India into the IAEA and into the global nuclear system. India, of course, has throughout been—I am sorry to say, unlike one of its neighbors—a very responsible state. It has never leaked in the slightest way any of its nuclear secrets. Indeed, India's own nuclear capacity was kept a secret for so long that I met a chief of staff of the armed forces in the early 1990s who didn't even know whether India had such a capacity or not. He had just retired. He wasn't trying to protect himself with any secrets. He was telling me how much the civilians in India had kept these secrets in their own control.

India, therefore, is a responsible country. When the [Bush](#) administration was attacked by the so-called "nonproliferation ayatollahs" in Washington, who said, "You can't make an exception for India, because then you would have to make an exception for Pakistan or for Iran," the Bush administration had the courage to stand up and say, "No. India is an exception. India is not Iran. India is not Pakistan. India is a responsible democracy. We want to partner with it. We feel it's the right thing to do."

When this negotiation concluded this summer, a piece of legislation was passed in Congress, named for [Henry J. Hyde](#), who is retiring, as the [Hyde Act](#). The Hyde Act contains some of the usual fatuous pronouncements that congressmen like to write into these things, including a requirement that the president certify that Indian foreign policy is congruent with U.S. foreign policy, before the deal can go into effect. Of course, this fell right into the hands of the anti-American lobby in India, who said that this agreement, therefore, was actually selling India short, was tying India to America's coat tails, and that therefore it was unacceptable.

So in India, instead of being able to celebrate the fact that the negotiators pulled off a deal that, frankly, two years ago it would have seemed inconceivable that an Indian negotiator could pull off, the government found itself on the defensive—thanks, I'm afraid, to another wretched British invention, the parliamentary system, as a result of which you elect a legislature, not to legislate, but to form the executive. The executive does not have a fixed term in office. It is dependent entirely on a majority in Parliament.

The ruling coalition right now is a coalition of 20 parties, the largest party being the Congress of Manmohan Singh and Sonia Gandhi. But the other parties include one-member and two-member parties in Parliament. Even those 20 parties don't have a majority. They require the votes of the two communist parties, who are not in the governing coalition, but support it from the outside, to survive any vote of no confidence.

Once the communists said, "You will not sell us short to the U.S., and if you try to operationalize this agreement, we will bring the government down," the government began to wobble.

Manmohan Singh and Sonia Gandhi initially took the tough line, "All right, if you want to bring the government down, we are prepared to face elections on this issue." They might have got away with it, but the 19 other smaller parties in the coalition were much less willing to face elections than the Congress was. The Congress was doing well in the polls and was likely to go up. The other parties were afraid of losing seats.

So I am afraid, right now, the result of all of this is that in the system which obliges us, therefore, to be dependent on the votes of the communist parties to stay in office, the Indian government has essentially put this agreement—this otherwise triumphal agreement—on the back burner.

There is an understandable amount of irritation in Washington. There is a feeling, too, that if India doesn't take the necessary steps to operationalize this agreement, which would mean, first, concluding an agreement with the IAEA (which will not take long to draft, though it needs to be done), and then persuading the 45-nation [Nuclear Suppliers Group](#), which includes China and other countries that have not been thrilled with this agreement, that they should all agree to going ahead with this, and then one more piece of legislation that is required in Congress to finally put it in place—if those things don't happen before the American electoral calendar for next year gallops on towards November, there is a real fear that this will never happen at all.

Certainly, I think Indians realize that a Democratic administration advised by people like my good friend [Strobe Talbott](#) would never agree to terms as generous as the one that the Bush administration has just given India.

So it is a bit worrying. At this stage, I have to say, it is probably a bit of a setback in India-U.S. relations. But the fact that it actually exists at all, this deal, is an amazing sign of how far India-U.S. relations have come from the bad old days of nonaligned hostility.

**QUESTION:** How different would India be today if in 1947, when the British were leaving India, they had not agreed to the establishment of a separate Muslim state?

**SHASHI THAROOR:** My hope is that India would have been the kind of India that India is today. India never bought into the logic of partition. It never accepted that religion was a valid basis for nationhood. The Indian nationalist leaders never said that since partitionists created a state for Muslims, what remains is a state for Hindus. On the contrary, they stuck to the logic of Gandhi and Nehru and the nationalist movement that India was a country for all who belonged to it and in its civilization.

I enjoy telling the story of how, in the [1971 war with Pakistan](#), the war that created Bangladesh, the head of the Indian Air Force in the northern sector was a Muslim, the overall commander-in-chief of the armed forces was a Parsi, the general in the eastern command who led the troops that marched into East Pakistan was a Sikh, and the major general who was helicoptered in at the end of the conflict to negotiate the terms of surrender of the Pakistani forces was Jewish.

That is the Indian heritage. I daresay that an India that incorporated all of what is today Pakistan and Bangladesh would have stuck to that ethos. Indeed, it would have been impossible not to, because also in India, including those parts of the country, the Muslim minority, which today is about 15 or 16 percent of India, would have been closer to 30 percent, and there would have been no question of anything other than a pluralist arrangement prevailing.

But, frankly, that's all water under the bridge now. It's not going to happen.

The demographics of what is today Pakistan, for example, have been transformed dramatically. When Pakistan was created, that area was about 70 percent Muslim. Today it's 99 percent Muslim. It no longer resembles what the rest of India is in terms of diversity and pluralism. So it's over.

**QUESTION:** Such a wonderful and colorful talk you have given us, and informative.

The Indian car company, Tata Motors, has announced that it has created a \$2,300 car. I am wondering whether the automobile in India is going to transform that country as the car did in America.

**SHASHI THAROOR:** This is the so-called "people's car," priced at 1 lakh rupee, or 100,000 rupees, which, when the price was announced, was about \$2,500. I'm afraid the dollar has been going steadily down, so the dollar tag is going up.

But a lakh of rupees is an amazing price for a car. I am told that a couple of other car manufacturers, international ones, want to follow. There is another company—but I am embarrassed that I can't remember the name—that is now coming in with a \$3,000 car. This is an international company, not an Indian car company. They said that the only country in the world where they could get the skilled engineering, the resources, and the labor to do a \$3,000 car was India. They hope to export it, too.

The problem with India is, of course, cars are proliferating, but our roads are not widening. We are ending up with a horrendous situation of traffic in every Indian city. Every time I go back, the traffic gets worse, in every place I go to. I just wonder how long we can indefinitely sustain this without a serious investment in our infrastructure.

**QUESTION:** First of all, wonderful. Just great.

That was [Tom Friedman's](#) point the other day in his article. He thought the car was a bad idea. He thought one needed much more mass transit.

My question, which sort of follows up on the other two here, is about India's role in what is happening, a) in Pakistan; b) in Iran; and c) in Iraq. When we read the American newspapers, India is never mentioned when you hear about turmoil in Pakistan or you hear about Iran building the bomb or not building the bomb, and about turmoil in Iraq.

I wonder if you could comment. Is India very concerned? Does India have a role to play? What is that



role?

**SHASHI THAROOR:** I will take each in turn.

Pakistan—of course India is concerned. It's watching it very closely and from very close by. But India understands that it's not its business. This is Pakistan's internal affair that only Pakistanis can solve for themselves. Other than, as I said, the usual ritual pieties about democracy, India would be very careful to not take a stance that, in fact, could become itself an element in internal debates within Pakistan. It is best that India maintains a discreet silence.

But, of course, it is concerned, because there is always worry that serious instability in a neighboring state could spill over into us. India today hosts 20 million Bangladeshis, who have come into India as migrants and refugees, and 7 million Nepalese. The last thing we want is one more element in that mix.

So we will be watching it carefully. But I don't think we expect that to happen. What we are seeing, though, is a situation in which silence is by far the wisest course for India to take.

On Iran, India's position is a little more complex. On the nuclear issue, India has been consistently with the United States. It voted against Iran in both the famous IAEA resolutions and has consistently taken the position that India does not want a nuclear-armed Iran and that Iran should be accountable for its nuclear policy.

In everything else, however, India has been very sympathetic to Iran. Iran is a country with which we have a long civilizational relationship, going back 3,000 or 4,000 years. The Iranians even stole their peacock from Delhi. So we have to say that there is a tremendous amount of affinity. Of course, Iranian painting, Iranian sculpture, Iranian music, and so on—Iranian cuisine—have influenced us for centuries. There is a tremendous sense of affinity with Iran in India.

Which means that India has the capacity to maintain a dialogue with Iran that ought to be valuable to the United States. But the United States has, rather, taken the position that it doesn't want countries to be friendly to Iran and has not been particularly happy, for example, when India, Pakistan, and Iran jointly tried to negotiate a pipeline that would bring Iranian gas across Pakistan into India. U.S. opposition has all but scuttled that. The Indian government, clearly out of deference to the United States, has been pushing this very much to the back burner.

But India does have good diplomatic clout in Tehran, and it's something the United States ought to think of using rather than discouraging.

Finally, on Iraq, the [BJP](#) government, the previous government, briefly flirted with the idea of participating in the U.S.-led coalition. It thought better of it. Of course, that was wise, given all that happened thereafter in Iraq, but also because the Indian Parliament, reflecting accurately Indian public opinion, was one of the few democratic parliaments to pass a resolution condemning the U.S. takeover of Iraq.

It is a country that has historically had good relations with India. India has had very profound misgivings about foreign troops in Iraq. For that reason, again, I think India will completely stay out of that one.

**QUESTION:** Shashi, it's so delightful to have you back. I just realized that maybe one of your future roles could be as the Indian foreign minister. You are certainly dealing with all these things now.

Part of your title is *Emerging 21st-Century Power*. Would you expand on it? We have had a number of speakers here who have said that since so many people expect the 21st century to be the Asian century, they see a balance of power in Asia of India, China, and Japan, and so forth. What do you think?

**SHASHI THAROOR:** A lot of things to say to that.

First, on your comment about foreign minister, you clearly have been Googling the Indian media. But I have to tell you, my usual response is that the Indian media has been busy offering me so many jobs in the government that maybe the government will start offering me jobs in the media now. I am not about to go off and become a minister of any sort.

Having said that, I have to tell you my original subtitle, which is the subtitle of the Indian edition, is merely *Reflections on India in the 20th Century*. This is a subtitle concocted by my American publishers, for whom I have the deepest respect. But it's not a formula I would have used. In fact, I have an essay in the book in which I reject explicitly the notion of power in the conventional military/economic /geopolitical sense. My argument is that India's biggest contribution in this part of the 21st century is going to be its soft power, the qualities of its culture, its civilization, and its democracy that make it an attractive place, rather than any muscle it can exercise on the world.

So in that sense, the subtitle is slightly misconceived.

On the question of an Asian balance of power, I have profound misgivings about that, too. Those who advocate that see India as some sort of counterweight to China. I have to say, very bluntly, it ain't gonna happen.

First, China is already in a different place. In about 1975, India and China had the same GDP per capita. China started liberalizing in 1976. It took off very rapidly. By the time India began to liberalize in 1991, the Chinese pie had already grown much larger than the Indian one. Thereafter, China was growing at 10-to-13 percent growth on a larger base.

So now, with China, it's not just a difference of degree; it's a difference of kind. China is in a different place altogether economically. To be very blunt, the only comparator that you are going to have to think about in the next 25 years is going to be between China and the United States. I don't think it's going to be between China and India.

As an Indian, I don't think India should be interested in playing that game anyway. We have enough challenges of our own to overcome by our own lights. Instead of being a counterweight, there are complementarities that we can look at with China.

India-China trade has gone up about 100 percent in the last four years. Though we had an unpleasant [war with China in 1962](#), both countries have successfully put that on the back burner, put the continuing border dispute on the back burner, and improved trade, improved tourism. One of the major Hindu pilgrimage sites is in Tibet, [Mt. Kailash](#). There are annual pilgrimages from India there, which the Chinese have been facilitating. The Chinese have just built a new road that makes it easier for people to go from India.

You have increased trade, as I mentioned. You have Indian IT firms that are opening branches in Shanghai. You have young Chinese engineers coming for jobs in Infosys in Bangalore. They hired seven of them this year.

So there is much more of an exchange than there ever was. India's interest clearly lies in not having a hostile northern neighbor. We have enough problems in our immediate neighborhood. We live in a tough and messy neighborhood, where there are serious troubles in Bangladesh and Nepal and Sri Lanka and in Pakistan. The last thing we need, it seems to me, is to get into any game of trying to counterbalance China.

Let's leave China to be China. Let's cooperate with it, trade with it. We don't have to be like China. Our domestic systems are very different. But we have no reason to be hostile to them at all. I don't think we should be heading in that direction.

So balance of power, no. Some complementarity and cooperation, yes.

I, frankly, genuinely believe that this whole question of balance of power comes from people who are afraid, who are fearful of the rise of a power like China. I think that fear is unnecessary and misplaced. I do think China is much more concerned about its own internal development than about flexing its muscles internationally, with the one exception, of course, of any developments on Taiwan, which one has to always keep an eye on.

But I don't see that China would necessarily pose a threat to anybody else, because they don't need to. They have enough to do internally, as well.

So there is no need to balance them because they are not, at the moment—we may have a different analysis in 15 years—at the moment there is no reason to think in terms of needing to balance a potential hegemonic power. Let them carry on. Asia can flourish with a multiple series of centers of power: China, Japan, which is finding its feet again, Southeast Asia—[ASEAN](#) [Association of Southeast Asian Nations] has been growing dramatically. I see the Singapore ambassador here. It's such an amazing success story, Singapore.

There are lots of things happening. I think Asia can benefit from more mutual interaction and growth than worrying about balancing each other.

**JOANNE MYERS:** Whether you are talking about soft power or hard power, it was a very powerful presentation. Thank you.

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