



Shashi Tharoor

Member of Parliament, Writer,
Politician and Diplomat

Interviewed by :

Adit Patel, Ved Mehta,
Faraz Rizvi & Soumya Ghosh

YT: You've had a career encompassing various spheres - writing, diplomacy, and politics. In retrospect, what would the highlights of your illustrious journey be?

ST: That's not an easy question to answer, especially since I've never allowed myself the luxury of complacency! There's always so much more to do that celebrating or dubbing a previous accomplishment as a 'highlight' seems counter-intuitive. The very terms of the question imply that one should look in terms of oneself, but I've always believed that accomplishment in one's career is a reflection of what you've been able to do to affect the lives of others. That is what motivates everything I do, be it my writing or my political work, or earlier my work for refugees, in peace-keeping and at the UN generally. That is why I am grateful to have got an opportunity to serve the people of my constituency in my role as an elected Member of Parliament on the issues that they care about.

YT: In one of your TED speeches, you holistically elucidate the essence of soft power. In this day and age amidst rising geopolitical tensions, how far do you think can soft power propel India as an emerging world leader?

ST: As I have pointed out before, I am not comfortable with the conventional notions of being a 'world leader' or being the next 'superpower', both of which are labels that have been associated with India of late. They strike me as being rather archaic, evocative of colonial empire struggles and the like; they describe India in a conventional framework of

military and economic might. Of course, both of those things are important for the destiny of any country but that is not what India should be all about or is all about. We can't be a superpower when we are super poor! We have significant internal challenges such as poverty, malnutrition, literacy and so on, all of which have to be addressed first.

That said, I also believe that if we manage to maintain the principal elements of our soft power prowess, such as our practice of being a free, democratic land open to the contention of ideas by a thriving civil society, then our India will continue to be a land which tells stories that others want to hear and gladly replicate. However, I must say that under the current environment of mob lynchings, 'cow vigilantism', journalist assassinations and failing economic policies, this positive image of India has taken a beating, but if our society can come through this phase and reassert India's 'live and let live' values, then we may be able to salvage our country's soft power potential and use it effectively to offer leadership in the 21st century.

YT: Kerala recently became the first Indian state to achieve 100 per cent primary education. Although the overall literacy rate is slowly rising, what do you think are the persistent flaws in the education sector?

ST: While literacy is a good measure of the country's education system, our chronic problems remain. Yes, a 100 per cent in primary education is an achievement, though we have apparently slipped back to 96 per cent literacy overall. As a Keralite I'm

proud of being Number One in the country but I am conscious that such figures are not things that we should be extremely proud of in themselves - at the end of the day, these are just stats that don't actually tell us anything about the quality of education that is being delivered at the primary school level. The fact of the matter is, many of the schools in our education system, particularly the schools in the less fortunate parts of our country, still struggle with providing our youth with the necessary skills required to succeed in today's dynamic job markets. If an education does not translate into gainful employment for our young after they graduate, people will begin to lose trust in the education system altogether. As a former Minister of State for Human Resource Development, I am extremely conscious of issues plaguing our education sector - our out-dated academic curriculum in high school and higher education, a debilitating shortage of qualified and skilled teachers, the profound lack of institutional and industry linkages - all of which mean that we effectively produce graduates that don't match the requirements our firms need to remain competitive with their global counterparts. In fact, there have been some instances where companies themselves conduct months of additional training just to ensure that these graduates can meet their entry-level job requirements!

YT: Your countless works, both fiction and nonfiction, have struck a chord with Indians both in India and those settled abroad. Is it the modernity of your thoughts or their simplicity that helps you connect with the population at large?

ST: Well, I think a large part of the reason as to why my work has struck a chord with Indians is because most of my 16 books have been about India! I'm not sure I would have cultivated the same readership in India had I written mainly about other countries... But, at the same time, I feel that the most important thing any writer -- whether a journalist, commentator or author -- needs to do to connect with his or her audience is to believe in what they are writing about. You must have something to say that you need and want to say, that you believe it's important for your

fellow Indians to hear, before you begin to write. Only if that is so will your writing reach out to the readers and add value by giving them a new understanding of the subject you have taken up. That is what makes it exciting to write, that sense that there is something you want to communicate. I have tried to do that throughout my career and perhaps that is what has helped me succeed, both as a writer and indeed as a politician and public figure in today's media-saturated, soundbite-hungry world!

YT: How would you want to be remembered - as a politician with a famous pen, or an author and editor who actually pioneered reforms that he spoke of?

ST: Is there really a difference? My words and my actions come from the same source -- my own deep beliefs and values. Still, I believe that what one leaves behind as a writer endures far longer than what one achieves in politics. At the end of the day, a politician may feel that he can do better for the society as a whole than a writer can. But look at me as an individual: I'm already a former minister. One day, I'll be a former MP. I hope never to be a former writer.

YT: As someone who has been a part of the St. Xavier's family, what words of wisdom would you like to share with the students of St. Xavier's College, Kolkata?

ST: While academic excellence is important, it is also important to be kind, honest, compassionate and empathetic. I think in a sense our current education system likes to preach that life is primarily about being better than the next person. It really isn't. It's about being better than your less good self. It's about fulfilling whatever god-given potential (or that given to you by your parents or your genes, whichever belief system you practice!) you've got, because every one of us has some talent - use it, take risks and never be afraid to fail. And finally, always remember that nobody can be a better you than you yourself. Don't let yourself down, and the rest will follow.