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POWER
OF THE WORD
Dr．Shashi Tharoor


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# POWER OF THE WORD 

Dr. Shashi Tharoor

## Friends and lovers of literature, I hope that covers everybody.

It's indeed an honour for me to be delivering this year's Balakrishna Marar memorial lecture and I'm privileged to being asked to speak on the 'Power of the Word'. In a world driven by hatred and intolerance, where an attempt is being made to muzzle the voices of those clamouring for their inalienable rights and where writers are often attacked as Sarah Joseph reminded us for offending mercurial sensibilities, we can in no way overlook the importance of the 'word'. Because without words we would not be able to express ourselves, without words we would not be able to understand each other.

I'll be speaking today about the power of literature and writing and how they can be used to affect meaningful change.

Barbara Tuchman, the Pulitzer Prize winning American historian, once wrote that "books are the carriers of civilization. Without books history is silent, literature is dumb, science is crippled, thoughts and speculation are at a stand-still. Without books the development of civilization would have been impossible. They are engines of change, windows on the world and light houses erected in the sea of time. They are companions, teachers, magicians, bankers of the treasures of the mind. Books are humanity in print!". I think that's really beautifully expressed and I want to share that with you because perhaps no one embodied this as profoundly as Shri. Balakrishna Marar himself whose love of books and reading was not born of a sheltered childhood. Having lost his father as a toddler, Balakrishna Marar has to drop out of school at a young age, a very early age, when he was still in class six, to shoulder the honorous burden of being the sole bread winner of the family. His family was in dire financial straits and to alleviate their woes, he began hawking newspapers by day, and by afternoon and evening he sold books. Thus began his lifelong tryst with books, one which would ultimately enshrine him in all our hearts as one of Kerala's leading publishers. From purveying books on foot in Kozhikode, he graduated to cycling about town on that alluring green bicycle that you can see outside. With a bag full of books slung around either shoulder and of course some tied to the back, with scarcely any money to buy himself food, Shri. Marar would survive
merely on tap water, relentlessly striving to get to book lovers as he relates in his autobiography 'Kanneerinte Madhuryam', their daily quota of newspapers, periodicals, journals and books. In this incarnation Balakrishna Marar was himself a carrier of civilization. His was a single man's crusade to spread the love of words which inaugurated a silent revolution in the reading culture of Kozhikode. Growing from strength to strength by dent off his seas to stone, Shri. Marar founded the original seminal Touring Book Stall, which of course all of you in Kozhikode endearingly call 'TBS', in a one room space on SM street in 1958. Through TBS, he sought to deliver books at his clients doorsteps thus, bringing the process of reading and buying books far closer to people's homes and hearts. Shortly afterward in 1963, he established 'Poorna Publishing', a redoubtable pillar of Malayalam publishing. So far I'm told that TBS in collaboration with Poorna Publishing has bought out close to ten thousand books including those of such stalwarts as Thakazhi Sivashankara Pillai, G. Sankara Kurup, Akkitham, S. K. Pottekkatt, O. N. V. Kurup, M. T. Vasudevan Nair, U. A. Khadhar, Jifri Thangal and Uroob. The royalties that he faithfully paid often helped to keep these great writers at the early stage of their lives, keep their heads above water. All of us as lovers of book must be grateful to Shri. Balakrishna Marar for his immense con-
tribution to the world of Malayalam literature, and also for the avuncular warmth with which he famously encouraged and supported budding writers. It is individuals like him who remind us that books are not merely tiny black squiggles on white paper enclosed between two covers, they are instead products of the tireless struggle of several people, not just writers but also editors, publishers, type setters, designers, printers, distributers and bookshop sales people, as well as a lonely man on a bicycle. Without those people and that intimate tender human touch, literature of any kind is simply not possible. In fact that 20000 sq. feet shop that the TBS became, completely dedicated to the celebration of language and learning is his legacy and I think in many ways what Mr. Marar's life story tells us is that successful true value, when it is has been fueled by a purpose that seeks to help society prosper. His dream has created a publishing house and bookstore that remains the oldest and most trusted in South India for the last seven decades. And his autobiography fittingly won the prestigious Abu Dhabi Shakti Award for autobiography in 2006. We all sadly lost him last year but we are fortunate that his son Shri N. E. Manohar is taking his invaluable legacy forward.

As Salman Rushdi as often said "humans are the only species who to understand themselves and the world around them better, tell each other

stories, Stories to make sense of our world". And if it is not for such souls as Shri. Balakrishna Marar, the stories of our world and society would remain woefully untold. It's there for me all the more and honour to deliver a lecture in celebration of his memory and rich legacy.

Now not a day goes by these days without my being asked mostly by young children egged on by enthusiastic parents, what they must to develop a formidable vocabulary? My answer is inevitably just a single a word- Read! In fact it worries me today that reading for so many children, is no longer associated with pleasure. Reading instead is entwined with books, textbooks and studies confined to the drudgery of school obligations. So when it comes to pleasure, most youngsters nowadays prefer looking at a screen, their mobile phones or laptops, PlayStation or Nintendo. It would not I think be wrong to say that the covid-19 pandemic when one was helplessly closed at home, exacerbated the menace of the screen. Off late I have met too many children who have never read book for pleasure or entertainment, only for a classroom assignment. This is a terrible loss. And failing to convey the joy of reading is probably the biggest mistake that successive generations of parents and teachers have allowed themselves to make. But of course there is still time to remedy the situation. So long as we recognize the problem and work to rectify it.

My own childhood was rather different. Growing up as a child of middleclass parents in urban India in Mumbai and later Kolkata in the late 50s and 60 s meant growing up with books. Television does not exist in the Bombay of my boyhood. I-phones, laptops, Nintendo and PlayStations were not even a gleam in inventor's eye, let alone mobile phones. And if your siblings were as in my case, two younger sisters with an age difference of four and six years from me, there was only one thing to do when you weren't with your friends- read! And as a young asthmatic child I was frequently confined to bed, struggling to breath and reading was my only solution. I read copiously, rapidly and indiscriminately. Because of the chronic asthma, I found so much pleasure in the book piled up in my bed side, that I stop resenting my illness. Reading became the central focus of my existence. There was not a day in my childhood that did not feature a book or several. One year I foolishly set myself the challenge of reading 365 books. I kept the list of volumes I finished comics didn't count. And indeed

I reached 365 before Christmas. But I told my sons - "Never do this". Never read to a deadline because fulfilling that deadline interferes with the joy of reading. An abiding memory is of my mother coming into my room around eleven every night and switching off the light. I wasn't smart enough to think of holding a flashlight under the covers. But sometimes I would wait for my parents to fall asleep in their room, then surreptitiously switch my light on again to finish the book they had interrupted. The journey that begins the adventure reading is often ignited by a single book and of course by a parent. It was my mother who started me off on this journey to begin with because when I was still in diaper she would read to me from the Naughty books of Enid Blyton stories. It's about a nodding wooden doll and his friends in Toyland. My mother jokes that she read them so badly that I couldn't wait to grab the books from her by myself and so before I was three I was reading Naughty and soon moving on to read other stories by Blyton, the world's most prolific children's author whose prodigious output of over 200 books could take you through an entire childhood. It was only the beginning through the classroom with its British inspired curriculum was a rich source of inspiration at the age of nine I was already getting Lamb's tales from Shakespeare, at ten Charles Dickens's Oliver Twist both on a bridge and the Bard himself- Shakespeare mildly expedited made an appearance on the syllabus when I was eleven. In the same year and otherwise detestable teacher dictated a passage from P. G. Woodhouse at a spelling test and launched me on my first great literary passion of my life. There were also several Indian stories that I race through in those days. Sadly there were few good Indian children's books available in English in a market still dominated by the British. The one area where Indian publishers could hold their own was retelling the Indian Classics. I remember several versions of the traditional tales I had learnt from my grandmother, episodes on the Ramayan, the Mahabharat, which later inspired my first novel, and the fables of the ancient Jatakas in the Panchatantra. The other Indian stories I remember enjoying as a child were a clever short stories about Birbal and Tennali

Raman, two wise and witty men from opposite corners of the country, who resolved problems in what were essentially extended anecdotes. So mine was in all in all a childhood, I suppose it's a uniquely Indian experience to embrace both Blyton and Birbal, Jeeves and the Jatakas, Tintin and Tennali Raman in your reading. What persist and I have no doubt forever will is a vivid sense of books devoured as a sources of entertainment, of education, of escape, and of experience all be it vicarious experience. These are the very same emotions that we as parents, Educators and mentors must create for our own children. Books are like the toddy tappers hatchet cutting through the rough husks that enshrined our minds to tap into the exhilaration that ferments within. We owe to our children to help, to help to open their mindset to these possibilities by making reading fun again. Perhaps, we can start even with inappropriate reading as some people considered comics, just letting the children get into the habit of picking up something that is not a screen and reading it. Comics can have interesting themes, be alluring to look at and stimulating a thought. It's the child's curiosity that we must aim to peak and in so doing pave the way forward for them to begin their own adventure of reading. That is the power of the word! What more should I say about it?

Writers after all are supposed to write. We should leave the pontificating to the critics. But once in a while even writers are forced to think about their craft to interrogate themselves. Sarah Joseph did so just a few days ago in a lovely speech at Maharaja's College in Ernakulam. I was obliged to do so some years ago when I found myself the subject of a long interview, which include the somewhat startling question- "Do you think your text belong to you?" I suppose it was inevitable that sooner or later a professor of literature would ask me this postmodernist question. It came from Dr. Ranjan Ghosh of the University of Brainware, near Kolkata and faced with his earnest and impressively theoretical approach to my work. I had to explain that I not only have never taken a writing course, I didn't even study literature at the University. I thought that would be like learning about girls at a medical school. Indeed my favorite craft, my favorite story of the craft of teaching writing is that of the British instructor, who told his writing students that
to ensure commercial success a story needs to contain religion, aristocracy, sex and mystery and be brief. The briefest submission duly came in one sentence long- 'My God! Exclaimed the Duchess of Argyll: I'm pregnant! Who did it?' Religion, aristocracy, sex and mystery all in the right order and stunningly brief. The instruction couldn't be better, the teacher gave up. Now, just as well writing to me is a wholly instinctual activity. It is about expressing your most intimate feelings and thoughts and it is as much you as the way you breathe. Nor would I want anyone else to tell me how to write. In my writing I've always seen the telling of the tale as being as important to me as its author, as the tale itself. My text belongs to me in the sense of the words I have chosen to employ are the only ones that are authentic to what I have tried to convey. The same story, the same concerns can obviously be told or expressed by different writers in different ways. My way is the way in which my text has chosen to tell itself through me and in that form it belongs solely to me. I'm glad to see Sara nodding in agreement.

But I've often felt as writer that I'm giving expression to something beyond myself. Something that emerges from a different realm, that I perhaps unconsciously tap into the act of writing. To that degree the text is both mine and beyond me. An artifact that emerges like a stream from the ocean of stories, the 'Kathasarithasagaram' that I've been privileged to channel in my readers, for that channel to my readers. For that reason, I'm prepared to accept the notion that my text may contain hidden meanings of which myself was not conscious in the act of writing. This is certainly true of painters, who may find something emerging from the brush strokes they have applied on the canvas, that was not wholly present in their mind when they were wielding the brush. Though text seems more limiting than the paint, the principle is essentially the same for all art. Of course the critic who read the meanings in the author did not consciously intent is guilty of a form of subversion and the author is entitled to argue back that his text does not support the critics' analysis. There the owner is on the critic to make his case and for the fair minded reader to draw her own conclusions.

My twenty-five books have all in different ways been about my personal exploration of In-
dia, of the forces that made it and nearly unmade it of the historical and philosophical traditions that have shaped the Indian identity. While, this is explicit in my twenty one books of non-fiction, my four books of fiction to which Mr. Sudhir has alluded today have also sought to explore the Indian condition particularly by looking at the kinds of stories that Indians tell about themselves, whether the stories of our epics and of our Nationalist struggles as in the 'Great Indian Novel' or the stories of the popular cinema as in 'Show Business', or the stories of the identity and the histories we construct for ourselves as in 'Riot'. In all three novels, though each is very different from other two, it is true to say that the architecture of the book speaks of an India of multiple stories, multiple perspectives, multiple tellers, and multiple truths. So if we come back to the Great Indian Novel, three or four people today have talked about it to me before I got on stage, I have rather overtly stake to claim for the tasks of my kinds of fiction, to affirm and enhance an Indian cultural identity, to broaden understanding of the Indian cultural and historical heritage, and to reclaim for Indians the story of India's nationalist experience and its own reassertion of itself including the triumphs and disappointments of Independence. My story in the Great Indian Novel was about the kinds of stories that Indians have been telling themselves, both the Mahabharat and the story of the Nationalist movements, and in it I set up to explore what has made India, what is the nature of truth in life as in fiction, in tradition as in history. My second novel 'Show Business' also deals with the stories Indian society tells itself except that instead of the olden myths I have seized on the contemporary myths invented by modern Hindi cinema. One is always looking for the new creative metaphors to explore the Indian condition and in a country of widespread illiteracy, especially when I wrote the book a majority of Indians were still illiterate in 1991. A country where popular film represents the primary vehicle for the transmission of the fictional experience, then cinema is a particularly useful vehicle this exploration. Can one use the power of the word to explore the power of the image? In addition, there are some interesting issues that emerge from the subject itself, the social and political relevance of popular cinema in India for instance has been dealt with surprisingly little in Indian fiction in

English. And the whole process of the manufacture of our modern myths on celluloid is one that I found fascinating as a creative issue in itself. My concern was both with the question what to do these stories reveal about ourselves and with a distinct second set of questions how are these stories told, what do they mean to those who make them and those who view them, how do these stories relate to their lives. In 'Riot' the exploration of the build up to and the eruption of a Hindu-Muslim riot leads me to raise fundamental questions about the nature of truth, the construction of identity, the invention and reclaiming of the past, the uses of history, and the various collisions that life offers, collisions which means cultures between attitudes to life, between ideologies, between religious communities, and between men and women. Unlike the other two this is not a satirical novel and so it involved an important departure for me as a writer. And in many ways when I talk about my own books, it is to show you where I thought the power of the word could be applied so to some of my major intellectual preoccupations about India. I once said to an interviewer, this is a long time ago- "India matters to me and through my writing I would like to matter to India". The lines have been quoted back to me as a great deal and perhaps they sound more grandiose than I had intended. But the issue of national allegiance, their claim is real enough. The task of the writer if one can say such a thing is to find new ways and revive old ones of expressing one's culture, just as your society strives through development to find new ways of being and becoming. In turn the challenge of finding these new ways obliges the novelist, not just to find new stories to tell but new ways to tell them. For me as a writer, the way I tell the story is as important to me as the story itself. The manner in which the narrative unfolds is as integral to the novel as the story it tells and as essential I hope to the experience of the reader. I've always believed that as the very word 'novel' suggests there must be something innovative about every book I set out to write. In Riot, for example I perhaps explored the power of the word by telling the story through newspaper clippings, diary entries, interviews, transcripts, journals, scrap books, even poems written by the characters. In other words, using a different dozen voices, different stylistic fonds for different fragments

of the story. So the structure of the novel served a substantive purpose in pointing to different perceptions of truth and history, and therefore of the Indian reality. The narrative suggests that omniscience is not possible. The reader is in the hands of a dozen subjective narrators and feels the truth is indeed a word that can be modified by a possessive pronoun, a question I first asked in the Great Indian Novel. Riot is also a book you can read in any order though ideally you should read it from beginning to end, you can pick it up from any chapter go back or forward to any other chapter and you will bring a different level of awareness to the story. In so doing you would recreate my text as your own.

Some Indian critics still suggest that there is something artificial and un-Indian about an Indian writing in English. One critic disparagingly declared that the 'acid test' ought to be could this have been written only by an Indian and his view the Indian writing in English for the most part fails the test. Now I have not never been much of a literary theoretician as I already said in the beginning. But for the most, not all of my own writing, I would answer that my works could not only have only been written by an Indian but only by an Indian in English. I write for anyone who will read me, but first of all for Indians like myself. Indians who have grown up speaking, writing, playing, wooing and quarreling in English all over India. No writer really chooses a
language. The circumstances of his upbringing ensure that the language chooses him. Members of this class have entered the groves of academy and condemn themselves in terms of bitter self reproach. One Indian scholar Professor Harish Trivedi has asserted, in English that Indian writers are cut off from the experimental mainstream and from that common cultural matrix shared with writers of all other Indian languages. Trivedi metaphorically cites the fictional English medium schools in R. K. Narayan's story whose students must first rub off the sandalwood paste caste marks from their foreheads before they enter their portals. Quote again from Trive-di- "For this Golden gate is only for the day the deracinated, the ruthless to pass through, for those who have erased their antecedents". It's an evocative image even though I thought that the secular Indian state was supposed to encourage the erasure of casteism from the classroom. But the more important point is that writers like myself, do share a common cultural matrix or be one devoid of helpfully identifying cast marks. It is one that consists of an urban upbringing and a pan national outlook on the Indian reality. I do not think this is less authentically Indian than the world views of writers in other Indian languages. Why should the rural peasant or the small town school teacher with his sandal wood smeared forehead be considered more quintessentially Indian, than the music loving collegiate
or the Bombay socialite who are also much part of the Indian reality. India is a vast and complex country. In Walt Whitman's famous phrase it contains multitudes. I write of an India of multiple truths and multiple realities, an India that is greater than the sum of its parts. English expresses the diversity better than any Indian languages I know, precisely because It is not rooted in any one region of my vast country. At the same time as an Indian I remain conscious of and connected to my pre-urban and non Anglophone antecedents. My novels reflect an intellectual heritage that embraces as I mentioned the Mahabharata, our own 'Ottan Thullal' of which my father was a gifted practitioner and the Hindi B- movies of Bollywood along with Shakespeare, Woodhouse and the Beatles. Why not?

As a first generation urbanite myself, I kept it returning throughout my years, in my childhood in particular, to the Kerala villages of my parents in Palakkad. And in my life as in my writings I kept returning to Kerala. Yes, I have grown up in Bombay, Kolkata and Delhi, and each of those Indian cities is a thousand miles apart from each other. The mother of my children is half Kashmiri half Bengali, my own mother used to live for many years in the southern town of Coimbatore and this may be a wider cultural matrix than the good Dr. Trivedi imagined. But it draws from a rather broad range of Indian experience and English is the language that brings these various threads of my India together. The language in which my former wife could speak to her mother in law, the language that enabled a Calcuttan to function in Coimbatore, a language that serves to express the complexity of the proliferous Indian experience better than any other language that I know. Inevitably the English language fundamentally affects the content of each of my books, but it does not determine the audience of the writer. Because, as long as the translations exist, language is a vehicle and not a destination. Of course there is no shame in acknowledging that English is a legacy of the colonial connection, but that is no less useful and valid than the railways, the Telegraphs or the Law courts that were also left behind by the British. Historically English helped us to find our Indian voice that great nationalist Jawaharlal Nehru wrote his discovery of India in English. But the eclipse of that dreadful phrase the Indo-Anglian novel has occurred precisely because Indian writers have evolved well beyond the British connections to their native land. The days
when Indians wrote novel in English either to flatter or rail against their colonial masters are well behind us. Now we have Indians in India writing as naturally about themselves in English as Australians or South Africans do. And their tribe has been supplemented by India's rich diaspora in the United States which has already produced an impressive crop of novelists with pullet surprises and National Book of Awards to their names. Their addresses don't matter, because writers really live inside their own head and on the page and geography is merely a circumstance. Their writers secure of themselves and their heritage of diversity and they write free of the anxiety of audience, for theirs are narratives that appeal as easily to foreigners as to Indians and indeed to readers, irrespective of their ethnicity. Surely, that's the whole point about literature. That for a body of fiction to constitute a literature, it must rise above its origins in setting even its language, to render accessible to a reader anywhere, some insight into the human condition. Read my books and those of other Indian writers, not because we are Indian, not necessarily because you are interested in us or in the country, but because these books are worth reading in and of themselves. And so each time you pick one of my books, ask not for whom I write. I write for You!

So to go back to the question that the professor asked me- does my text belongs to me? As Sudhir has already quoted me saying so, but perhaps for the late comers it might be interesting. I write as George Bernard Shaw said for the reason, the same reason that a cow gives milk. It's inside me, It's got to come out and in the real sense I would suffer if I couldn't. It's the way I express my reaction to the world I live in, to the world I see around me and the world I try to imagine. It would be as futile to claim the ownership of it, as for a cow to assert that she owns the milk she has provided. No, dear reader, the text no longer belongs to me. It belongs to You! Thank you very much!








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