

CULTURE / RELIGION

Tharoor Celebrates Dynamic India at 'India Rising'

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indiawest.com

March 24, 2009 03:29:00 PM

SAN FRANCISCO — A stirring affirmation of India's "soft power," albeit tempered by an acknowledgement of the challenges it faces, by author and former UN undersecretary general Shashi Tharoor; an inquiry into the social implications of the "Indian Idol" phenomenon by UC Berkeley sociologist Raka Ray; and a celebration of the cinema of Satyajit Ray by UC Santa Cruz historian Dilip Basu were the highlights of "India Rising: Tradition Meets Modernity," a program held at the Herbst Theatre here Feb. 27-28. The two-day event was billed by organizers Humanities West as a series of "lectures, discussions, and musical presentations exploring the dynamic fusion of modern Indian culture, where ancient tradition meets current innovation and is revealed in contemporary art, literature, film, and music."

"The impact of India's soft power in the intangibles is huge," said Tharoor in his keynote speech. "It's about everything from Mahatma Gandhi's use of soft power principles to win us our independence, all the way down to what Indian culture represents to a large number of people, particularly to the developing world," he said.



In a speech delivered with the panache of a raconteur, peppered with colorful anecdotes, statistics and leavened with more than the odd quip, Tharoor said that notwithstanding the challenges ranging from crippling poverty to radical leftist insurgencies, he took pride in India's attempt "to establish a place in the 21st century that is truly worth celebrating, a place that reflects the diversity of India's heritage, the pluralism of its civilization, the freedom of its democracy and, of course, that enshrines always the possibility of people within Indian society to rise above their origins.

"That was a simple message in 'Slumdog Millionaire,' it was also a message in the fact that our largest state today, Uttar Pradesh, a state of 200 million people, is ruled by a woman from the Dalit community. . . It's like a black person being governor of Texas."

Tharoor said that India's method of accepting diversity in its political and social fabric was more open than the U.S.

"I tell Americans if you are a melting pot we are not," he said. He said India was more like the traditional Indian meal, a "thali," which offered "a number of different dishes in different bowls, because each dish is in a different bowl, it doesn't flow in the next dish. But all these dishes belong to the same plate and they combine together on your palate to give you a satisfying

repast.”

To be sure, soft power would not be enough, Tharoor said. “Soft power alone, sadly, doesn’t keep a country safe or prosperous. An Islamist terrorist who enjoys a Bollywood movie will still have no compunction about setting off a bomb in Delhi or Bombay, just as the U.S. has learned that the perpetrators of 9-11 ate their last meal at McDonald’s, so soft power has its limitations,” he continued.

Likewise, Tharoor stressed that India faced formidable challenges, regardless of its strides in terms of economic growth. While according to Forbes magazine, the world’s top billionaires included four from India, 260 million people lived below the poverty line, and that was by the miserly calculation of the Indian government which in rural areas was a measly Rs. 360 per month, “a poverty line barely this side of the funeral pyre,” he said.

India produced world-class scientists and engineers, yet 400 million people were illiterate. “We have more children who have not seen the inside of the school than any country in the world,” he lamented. In 165 of 602 districts in India, Maoist insurgencies threatened social order.

Yet the technological and economical progress India has made was also breathtaking, he said. He gave the example of the dizzying proliferation of the cell phone. Tharoor recalled the time back in 1975 when India had two million phones for 600 million people. Today, India has 11 million cell phones, second after China, and surpassing even the U.S.

Sociologist Raka Ray, chair of Berkeley’s Center for South Asia Studies, took a closer look at “Indian Idol,” a competitive reality show along the lines of “American Idol” where anyone can aspire to be a star, and said the show provided a glimpse into how India’s middle classes were becoming more assertive.

“There are clearly vast changes going on in India. But if we know only the economic aspects of this, we really understand very little,” Ray said. “I’ve tried to show through popular culture how we can get a glimpse of this newly aspirational middle class, a class that is seizing every opportunity that they are given to participate in the life of this country.”

Ray focused on two interesting aspects of “Indian Idol” contests: gender and ethnicity. Women from conservative families were competing with gusto, she said. “Two generations ago, indeed perhaps even one generation ago, no respectable middle class Indian parent would dream of letting their daughter dance wearing tight and revealing clothes on stage,” Ray said. “As the neighborhoods and communities embrace the successes of these young women, they no longer fear that her respectability and therefore her marriageability are at stake.”

The other interesting development, she said, was the emergence of the Northeast as an important player.

“The northeast region of India is arguably the most marginalized and neglected part of the country,” she said. Last season a Darjeeling-based contestant of Nepali origin, Prashant Tamang, “not one of the very best,” reached the top 10, resulting in “the most amazing campaign,” Ray said. A typical Internet message urged people to support him as this was “the only genuine chance to do something for the Nepali community.”

Historian Dilip Basu talked about the cinema of Satyajit Ray and attempted to place his work in

the context of Indian cinema.

In a presentation that included clips from Indian cinema as well as clips from Ray's films, Basu connected Ray's work to the tradition of Rabindranath Tagore, who had written an excerpt of one of his poems in Ray's autograph book when Ray was barely a toddler: "I have seen the highest peaks, I have seen the greatest oceans, but I still have to open my eyes to a field next to my house, (to) a dew drop on a blade of grass."

Basu said there was a message here that Ray subsequently took to heart.

"In this Tagore says you may be global, you may be going to the West for your education, but you have to be grounded in reality, your roots have to be local," Basu said. "Unless you can combine the two, you are nobody."

The presentations by Humanities West included a reading by novelist Vikram Chandra from his book; a lecture by Dard Neuman, the Kamil and Talat Hasan Endowed Chair in Classical Indian Music, UC Santa Cruz; and a performance by Indian classical musicians Joanna Mack and Tim Witter. Stanford Professor Saikat Majumdar had spoken on modern India and Anglophone literature at an earlier pre-program event.