

**S**hashi Tharoor, Member of Parliament (MP), believes in cutting across political lines—appreciating without hesitation the government's good initiatives and at the same time being critical of the government for their wrong doings in equal measure. The former United Nations (UN) Under-Secretary-General enjoyed his stint at the UN and took on everything as a challenge—from heading the refugee office in Singapore to the tough peace keeping operations in the former Yugoslavia.

As a biographer of Jawaharlal Nehru, 59-year-old Tharoor is a great admirer of the first prime minister of India. He admits to have fallen in love with Nehru's mind.

**Shivani Venugopal** caught up with the most followed Indian politician on twitter for good, bad and ugly reasons and spoke to him against the backdrop of his stint at the UN and the ongoing hostile political scenario in our Parliament.

While Tharoor has become controversy's favorite child following the unnatural death of his wife Sunanda Pushkar, and speculations are rife over him being subjected to a polygraph test in the near future as part of the investigations, Shivani has consciously decided to steer clear of anything controversial and focus solely on his stint with the UN and his evolution as an Indian politician. Edited excerpts.

**You spent 29-years at the UN and was Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information. Why did you quit?**

I'd run for the top position of the Secretary-General and came second out of seven contenders. The victor Ban Ki-moon was gracious enough to invite me to remain, but I felt as Ban Ki-moon had won the elections and he was the incharge, it would be inappropriate to cast a shadow on what he was doing. Any case, I'd always nurtured a desire to come back and make a difference in India and this seemed the right moment.

**Were you disappointed with the loss?**

Oh yes! I contested because I knew that I'd a very good chance of winning. In fact, apart from India, a large number of ambassadors of other countries too had urged me to contest. I also felt that I'd acquired the almost perfect background for the job, as I'd done all sides of the Secretary-General's work—political, humanitarian, communication, administration and management. Moreover, as a close aide of Kofi Annan, former Secretary-General, I'd seen the job in close quarters and therefore was well equipped for the top position.

**The US opposed your candidature, while China, despite voting in the first couple of ballots abstained from voting. Do you think that such positions are not about relevant resumes as the decisions are politically motivated?**

Inevitably, governments make political decisions and they've an idea about the kind of Secretary-General they desire. John Robert Bolton, the then American ambassador to the UN, has written a very disloyal memoir in which he has mentioned that his instructions were: 'We don't want a strong Secretary-General.' Political decisions are made in such situations and one must have the maturity to understand that each race of the sort involves its own calculus and I didn't figure on top of this calculus.

**Is Indian politics black and white?**

Indian politics has become a little more black and white than it used to be. It

# FACING CHALLENGES HEAD-ON



LOCATION: LEELA PALACE

definitely is not true still in other countries. Recently we witnessed a debate in the British House of Commons on the question whether Britain should bomb Syria? The Labour leader voted against, while his own foreign secretary voted for the government. There was no whip issued on such an important matter—it was considered to be perfectly normal.

Whereas in our politics everything involves a whip, the party gives the individual MP no choice in exercising his/her own conscience. Similarly, if the party has decided that everything the government says or does should be rejected and then an individual speaking out of turn is not welcomed. It's a different ethos in our country and in my view it's a pity that our ethos are so unpleasant.

**The PM nominated you for the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan. Do you think Modi has the ability reach out beyond political affiliations for the country?**

I not only thanked the prime minister on being nominated, but also explained in detail in my article on the reasons for me to go along with the Swachh Bharat campaign—I didn't see it as a political exercise and saw it as a national endeavour.

I saw Swachh Bharat as something that Mahatma Gandhi stressed upon before independence: 'Sanitation is more important than independence.' All governments in our country under different labels have pursued cleanliness programmes.

I thought it would be a seriously new programme with a large sum of money and a clear vision that would take into account the lessons learnt in the sanitation drives in the past—what has worked, what hasn't worked and what needs to be done differently.

**Do you think the Swachh Bharat initiative was for photo ops?**

Unfortunately, the implementation has been extremely disappointing. After doing a clean-up in my own beach in Thiruvananthapuram, I wrote to Modi pointing out that these were only symbolic sorts of gestures. There was remnant of the famous canal system that used to exist in Thiruvananthapuram, which was used for swimming, boating, etc., but now the canal has become a sewage dump and garbage area.

In my letter, I pointed that Swachh Bharat needs to create permanent solutions and should be doing projects like creating sewage systems for the houses on both sides of the canal so that they don't throw their wastes into the canal. These sorts of projects require crores of money that no local government has; I didn't even get a reply from the prime minister. Some of my criticism of Swachh Bharat is based on actual experience of implementation, not on politics.

**Politics of commotion has become a ubiquitous sight in our Parliament. Why do we see such irresponsible conduct by the opposition?**

The atmosphere in our Parliament between the political parties has been somewhat vitiated in recent years and the BJP bares a great share of the blame—for 10-years they conducted a really zero sum game politics. The things that even BJP would've previously acknowledged for the country's good: the Indo-US nuclear deal—which they opposed merely because the UPA was doing it. We saw the politics of destructions and disruptions from the opposition for 10-years.

**The Congress too has adopted the same policy of destructions and disruptions—two wrongs don't make a right.**

Sadly, the new Golden Rule in our politics appears to have become—'Do unto others what they've done unto you.' I would like to see a change, but as they say in the American military—'That's above my pay-grade,' as I don't get to make these decisions for either my party or the other side. Clearly there's a lot more reaching out that the BJP government ought to do because as the government they've a greater interest in making sure that the Parliament runs amicably; in turn, the op-

position leadership will have to consider the pros and cons on moving forward on these matters. I do want to point out that until the monsoon session was washed out in 2015, eleven bills passed during the budget session—so the government has had cooperation from the Congress.

**What sort of leaders do you expect India's youth to be?**

Leaders who're very conscious of the interconnectedness of the world and people who're aware of the need for diversity.



PICS: Joe Louis