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THE REDISCOVERY PROJECT

An expatriate, a frequent visitor, and now a Member of Parliament from the city—Shashi Tharoor—talks about his impressions of Thiruvananthapuram



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THE REDISCOVERY PROJECT

An expatriate, a frequent visitor, and a Member of Parliament from the city talks about his discoveries of Thiruvananthapuram

BY SHASHI THAROOR

How does one honestly write about a place one represents in parliament? I am the MP from Thiruvananthapuram, the capital of Kerala, and while I can be forgiven for wanting to praise the city that elected me, the truth is that I had to discover it for myself when I first contested for the Lok Sabha from there.

As the son of expatriate Keralites, I had never lived in Thiruvananthapuram before. Born in London, raised in Bombay, Calcutta and Delhi before going abroad for graduate studies and then embarking on a 29-year international career with the United Nations, I knew my parents' home state only from childhood visits to their ancestral villages in Palakkad District. (Even those I initially resented, grumbling to my parents that annual migrations south were strictly for the birds.)

But once in a while we got out of the villages to see other parts of the state. I was 11 years old when I first visited Trivandrum, as it was then known, with my family in 1967. I remember how there was a thunderous monsoon downpour—and within minutes the streets were bone-dry. I turned with astonishment to my father to ask him how that was possible, given that a rajnstorm like that in Bombay, where we were living, would cause so much flooding that young men would stand by to make some extra money by pushing stalled cars through the waterlogged roads. He explained to me that Trivandrum was the best-planned city in India, with every road built with a sloping gradient so that the rain poured into well-designed drains on the roadsides and flowed into the innumerable canals that in turn took the water to the sea.

I was suitably impressed, and recalled the story when, four decades later, I returned to a transformed Thiruvananthapuram to seek to represent it in Parliament. Of course the city had changed: many of the drains had been built over, the fabled canals were clogged with weeds and refuse, and some junctions now witnessed Bombay-style flooding. But these challenges apart, Thiruvananthapuram had managed to stay true to itself while finding new relevance as a 21st-century city.

On my first visit to Thiruvananthapuram after returning to India for good in 2008, I was given a warm reception at the city's pioneering Technopark, the first IT park in India. CEO after CEO told me in glowing terms of their satisfaction with the work environment in Thiruvananthapuram, the quality of the local engineering graduates, and the beauty of the lush and tranquil surroundings. But it all came together when one chief of a Technopark firm told me of having bid for a contract with a Houston-based company. The Americans had drawn up a shortlist of Indian service providers and placed the Thiruvananthapuram-based company last.

Then the American executives making the final decision flew down to India to inspect the six shortlisted firms. After three harrowing days ploughing through the traffic congestion and pollution of Mumbai, Bangalore, and Gurgaon, they arrived in Thiruvananthapuram, checked into their hotel at Kovalam beach, sipped a drink by the seaside at sunset, drove just 20 minutes in the morning to the greenest technology campus they had seen. They voted unanimously to give the contract to the Kerala firm. "If we have to visit India from time to time to see how our contract is doing," the chief said, "we'd rather visit Trivandrum than any other place in India."

As an MP who keeps travelling to his constituency, I can appreciate what the Americans were thinking. I'd rather visit



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