Chapter Seven. What does Advertisement do?
They create myths. Not to be taken pejoratively, a myth here doesn’t mean a traditional story accepted as history, or falsehood or an untrue story. Rather, modern advertisements create myths through the way they define people, places and things, and assign values and social norms to them. Advertisements don’t sell products only. Advertisements incorporate within themselves various tools of story-telling. Advertisements began to sell stories complete with the cinematic gears like lead characters, villains, songs sequences, suspense, settings, story, and plotlines. Advertisements especially TV advertisements have borrowed heavily from the form of cinema. They are ‘pseudo’ films. But while cinema has been subjected to a whole lot of academic interest, TV commercial is of much recent origin. Particularly in India, TV advertisements made an appearance on the airwaves only as late as 1975.

What is often ignored in TV advertisements is the ‘visual short-hand’ that has developed over time in them. Unlike the plot of a TV serial that takes weeks to unfold and a feature film that gets two hours to get across its message to the audience, a TV advertisement is crippled with time constraint. Since advertisement broadcast rates works out on a per second basic (the greater the reach and
viewership of the TV channel, the higher the advertising rate), TV advertisements have to build up a story, introduce characters, cover the plot, the suspense and the climax all in a matter of a few minutes at the most. Their message often makes use of the practice of investing things with symbolic meaning. People, places, and things have to be reduced to visual shorthand or a stereotype, in order to be incorporated into a 30 second TV commercial. Portrayal therefore largely becomes a symbolic representation of people, places, and things. But since advertisements operate within market norms at the behest of capitalist enterprises, they often visual society in terms of their clients. Advertisements therefore become not a reflection of an actual society, but rather how a society should be, as visualized by sponsors. Studies in advertising is very often confined to consumer behaviour, and done mostly from the end of consumer studies. Research in advertising purportedly intends to find out about the efficacy of billions spent in advertising campaigns, and how advertisements can more effectively target their intended audiences, eliciting more financial responses from the viewers. The success or failure of an advertising campaign is measured in terms of revenue generated through sales (direct or indirect) and not in terms of engendered lifestyles.