Chapter-III

Reel Life versus Real Life: Show Business

Show Business is another earnest endeavour to comprehend India, her people and the phenomenon called ‘Indianness’. Actuated by a sense of concern and curiosity, the novel is in fact a candid answer to the queries disturbing the author, who argues, “What do these stories tell to the Indians? What do they tell about Indians? What can we know about the world from which these stories come? That is the world of the film makers and the actors who make these films? And in turn, what does this all reveal about India as a society today?” (Kriesler).

Re-asserting and reinventing a sense of Indianness, Tharoor explores the Bombay movie industry and its films, which he considers to be the primary vehicle for the transmission of fictional experience to a majority of Indians. Justifying the use of this cinema based metaphor in Show Business during an interview, he explained:

In the second novel, I also looked at stories of the popular film industry. Why? Because our country is still fifty percent illiterate and films still represent the principal vehicle for the transmission of fictional experience. Other than your grandmother telling you the stories on her knee, you go off and get your fiction by watching a movie. (Kreisler)

Show Business is, at its simplest, a satirical account of Bollywood, or the Bombay (now Mumbai) film industry. Perceiving a close affinity between Indian diversity and Indian film industry, Tharoor avers:

The Indian film industry is by far the largest in the world--making twice as many films as Hollywood. Much of this is escapist entertainment, but it all reflects the understanding that the only possible idea of India is that of a nation greater than the sum of its parts. The film world embodies the very
idea of India's diversity in the way in which it is organized, staffed, and financed— and in the stories it tells. An India that denies itself to some Indians could end up being denied to all Indians; and so Indian films communicate the diversity that is the basis of the Indian heritage, by offering all of us a common world to which to escape, by allowing us to dream with our eyes open. (TETTTC 113)

Tharoor’s Show Business has been appreciated as well as condemned by critics and scholars. Presenting a fine review of Show Business Ramlal Agarwal writes:

*Show Business*, however, is conceived on a much narrower scale and lacks the boldness of the earlier work. It is about the life and career of an Indian film hero called Ashok Banjara. The novelist adopts an innovative method of giving headings and subheadings to the chapters: e.g., “Take One,” “Interior: Day,” “Exterior: Day,” “Monologue: Night,” et cetera. There are screenplays and shootings and film songs (translated into English) and happenings in dressing rooms. The story is told from several points of view so as to lend it the aura of an all-things-considered affair. Like all good novels, it deals with the perennial theme of fiction and fact, in this case the glamour that suffuses the personality of a film hero and the hollowness that lurks beneath it. (678)

Describing the themes of *Show Business* Anita Parihar asks certain pertinent and relevant questions regarding the role of films in India:

Shashi Tharoor builds up the theme of *Show Business* through the reel that runs in Ashok Banjara’s mind and the voices he hears. *Show Business* treats show business at two levels— the political and the reel level. Contradictory worlds are presented through the two levels. At the political
level a chaotic, complex democracy emerges and at the reel level a highly fantastic, exaggerated India emerges. What is the role of films in a country like India? Is it pure entertainment, a means of mass escapism, Or, does it have a more significant role to play? These are the questions that the novel tends to raise. (29)

Tharoor, in his novel *Show Business*, chooses to satirize this world. Mohd. Bashiruddin observes:

The name “Bollywood” is a portmanteau of Bombay, the former name for Mumbai, and Hollywood, the center of the American film industry. However, unlike Hollywood, Bollywood does not exist as a physical place. Though some deplore the name, arguing that it makes the industry look like a poor cousin to Hollywood, it has its own entry in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. The term “Bollywood” has origins in the 1970s, when India overtook America as the world’s largest film producer. Credit for the term has been claimed by several different people, including the lyricist, filmmaker and scholar Amit Khanna, and the journalist Bevinda Collaco. (29)

In *Show Business*, Tharoor deals with the glitterati of Mumbai’s tinsel town, the glamour, the gloss of breasts and curves matter more than their acting acumen: “*Show Business* is a shorter effort but still long enough and it is built on thin air, Bombay film world is its focus. The celluloid city is famous for what is called Bollywood. Cinema is big business and this tinsel town is well-known for its big spending, its creation of huge illusions, its escapist entertainment and its yellow journalism, scandals and hypocrisy. Tharoor chooses to satirize this world” (Ramanan 118). However, he does not like the novel and, a bit further in the same paper, criticizes the novel and the author both bitterly: “Here is a
writer of undoubted skills and enormous talent frittering away his energies on trivialities. *The Great Indian Novel* made me suspect this much but now I am confirmed in my view that Tharoor is merely a clever writer, playing to the gallery, a gallery made up of small English educated elite which cocks its snook up at things Indian. Tharoor is not a ‘serious’ novelist, he is an artful one” (118).

But critics like Bhatnagar and Sharma have shovered their encomium on the novel. They are of the view that in *Show Business* Tharoor reinvents the Bollywood tyo amuse his readers “but at the same time provokes a serious thought about the industry and the stories told by the industry about itself and India. It has numerous humorous bits also, but the underlying satire and parody with which Tharoor undercuts every event and every character, never allows the reader to lose sight of the inherent seriousness of the issues and questions raised in the novel” (35).

This cinema based metaphor is also a source of ‘pastiche’ in the novel. Justifying its use Tharoor observes: “In *Show Business*, I’m suggesting that these entertainments, these distractions, reveal a great deal about myself and people like me who go to these films. And I hope in the process therefore, I am revealing India, too” (Kriesler).

Tharoor’s personal standpoint is, however, more explicit than most contemporary writers. A social and political ideology is clearly articulated in his important non-fictional works like *India: From Midnight to the Millennium* (1997), *Bookless in Baghdad* (2005), *The Elephant, the Tiger and Cell Phone: Reflections on India in the 21st Century* (2007) and so here, in my thesis, Tharoor’s all fictional works are read in close conjunction with, his idea of plural India, which has been directly articulated in his above-mentioned non-fictional works. Undoubtedly, cinema or films are the primary vehicle for the transmission of ideas. In India it has got a peculiar privilege and position which not only entertains but also instructs to the common mass of our society leaving indelible mark on
the psyche of common people through the ample amount of audio-visual effects. Films, in India, have always reflected the diversity of pluralist society and their pleasures and pains. Besides, they are being used to foster communal harmony and a feeling of tolerance and brotherhood among different communities in India. Tharoor has himself confessed:

1970 mega hit “Amar Akbar Anthony”, for instance, was an action adventure film about three brothers separated in infancy who are brought up by different families – one a Christian, one a Hindu and one a Muslim. As a result, one is a smuggler, one a street fighter. How they discover each other and turn on the villains is why the audience flocked to the film . . . but in the process they also received the clear message that Christians, Hindus and Muslims are metaphorically brothers too, seemingly different but united in their common endeavor for justice. (qtd. in Sharma & Roy 03)

The plural image of India attracts Shashi Tharoor very much and it is the main force, motivation and inspiration behind all his, literary and non-literary, writings. In my previous chapters I have quoted Tharoor’s views extensively on his idea of India, Indianness and Indian culture. To him: “The whole point of Indianness is its pluralism” (TETTTC 61). In the same book he observes:

In this situation, films can--and do--play a vital role in keeping alive an idea of India that enshrines its diversity. Film is a more potent weapon than that used by the advocates of hatred. Bombs and riots cannot destroy India, because Indians will pick their way through the rubble and carry on as they have done throughout history. But what can destroy India is a change in the spirit of its people. The central challenge of India as it enters
the twenty-first century is not purely economic or simply political; it is the challenge of accommodating the aspirations of different groups in the national dream. The ethos of diversity--of an inclusionist, flexible, agglomerative India--can help the nation meet this challenge. The battle for India's soul will be between two visions of diversity, the secularist Indianism of the nationalist movement and the particularist fanaticism of the bigoted mob. The film world has a vested interest in the struggle because it too depends on the survival of the world from which it has emerged. (112-113)

Film, compared to literature, is a recent phenomenon which has borrowed a great deal from literature and other forms of expression. Perhaps even more markedly than in discussions of prose or poetry, when people write or talk about films they often use criteria and terminology originally developed with respect to painting or drama or the novel. There is nothing inherently wrong in this; such a tendency may even point to film as a medium combining complex ways. Many great characteristics which, other forms can exhibit only in particular ways like oil painting represents through images, novel through words but which film manages to do simultaneously--can combine images and words: “analogy between shot and word breaks down when we realize that any language has a more or less finite number of words, while the number of possible shots is literally infinite. There will never be an Oxford Dictionary of shot” (Robert 1452).

Film differs considerably from theater. In theater, there are no retakes; the first performance on stage with one to one correspondence between actor and audience is the real criterion of the performing arts. Theater is, in more than one sense, superior to film, the reality factor and the endless scope for the actor on the stage to emote makes theater superior to films. In the film industry behind the scene activity rehearsals take place so
many times that an actor loses his/her spontaneity in acting. But film has certain correspondences and affinities with other forms like drama, novel etc. It largely shares an impulse towards narrative with fiction, towards the telling of a story in linear terms. Its affinities with poetry may be seen in the isolation of a particular detail in a metaphoric way.

The presentation of an action often seems broadly theatrical, and indeed one of the chief problems in the early history of film was precisely to distinguish this new form, from its origins in ‘realistic’ drama. Film as an art form of the age of mechanical reproduction is a hybrid product of modern technology and man’s aesthetic imagination. A form that has borrowed freely from the existing art forms like literature, theater, dance, painting, architecture, music and cinematography etc. Just a hundred years old, cinema or film has brought out a revolutionary change in the way people perceive reality, the way they see things and the way they behave. The all-pervasive influence of film has surpassed all other influences of fine arts and culture on people’s imagination. Literature, in spite of being the oldest form of cultural communication, appears to have receded in background in the face of the over-powering might of cinema. Though the printed word is still held in awe and reverence as a symbol of God, the image itself has become a new kind of word to hold people in its thrall. Just as the word entices us with its magic, the image captivates us with its even more sensuous magic. While literature remains hitched to a kind of ethereal attraction to communicate its meaning, cinema carries us off our feet by the power of its sensuous images and melodic as well as provoking sounds. While only those who have a highly developed aesthetic sensibility and philosophical depth can understand and appreciate literature. Cinema can be enjoyed by all and sundry, irrespective of their level of literacy. Thus literature remains by and large an elitist form of art within the reach and comprehension of highly literate people alone, while cinema is a truly
democratic form of art that reaches out to the least literate and even the poorest. That is not to say that cinema does not require high levels of aesthetic literacy. But popular cinema is so direct and gross in its message - making skills that even the dumbest of them all would not miss the point of the visually stunning language of entertainment. The enduring secret of the popularity and power of cinema lies mainly in its visual range, the extreme mobility of its images and the fluidity of its shot compositions. The visuality of cinema holds the viewers in rapt, mindless fascination. Moreover, films in general ask the viewers to stare at the world, as though it were a naked body. Cinema allows the viewers not only to taste the forbidden fruit, but also to reach the unreachable, to enter the bedrooms of the great and the mighty, to see the spectacles of war, to experience and see vicariously all that they cannot hope to see even in their wildest dreams.

When Tharoor wrote the novel *Show Business*, some critics were surprised because they expected him to follow *The Great Indian Novel* and not a work that dealt with the trashy world of commercial Bombay cinema. But he did so because, to him, Indian films, with all their limitations and outright idiocies, represent part of the hope for India’s future. In a country that is still (whatever the official figures say) almost 40 per cent illiterate, films represent the prime vehicle for the transmission of popular culture and values. Bollywood and its regional offshoots produce more than 800 films a year in nineteen languages and employ 2.5 million people, and their movies are watched over and over again by the Indian masses, especially those with few other affordable forms of entertainment. In India, popular cinema emerges from, and has consistently reflected, the diversity of the pluralist community that makes this cinema. The ‘stories they tell are silly, the plots formulaic, the characterizations superficial, the action predictable, but they are made and watched by members of every community in India. Muslim actors play Hindu heroes; South Indian heroines are chased around trees by North Indian rogues. Representatives of
some communities may be stereotyped (think of the number of alcoholic Christians
played by Om Prakash, including in Zanjeer) but good and bad are always shown as being
found in every community. To take just one recent popular film: a Marathi-speaking
‘playback singer’ records an Urdu poet’s lyrics to the tune of a Tamil Muslim’s music; her
voice is then lip-synched by a Telugu actress, swaying to the choreography of a Goan
Christian dance director, as she is romanced by a Punjabi superstar; the resulting film,
produced by a Gujarati and directed by a Bengali, is then promoted by a Jewish public
relations executive and watched by Indians of every imaginable caste, creed, class,
costume, cuisine from all over the country.

The film world embodies the very idea of India’s diversity in the way in which it is
organized, staffed and financed-and in the stories it tells, Hindi movies are all for escapist
entertainment, so long as it serves to communicate the diversity that is the basis of the
Indian heritage, by offering all of us a common world to which to escape, by allowing us
to dream with our eyes open. The popular entertainment can unite our diverse
communities. Presenting an striking example Tharoor avers in his Bookless in Baghdad:

A lovely story that illustrates the cultural synthesis of Hinduism and Islam
in India was recounted by two American scholars, Lloyd and Susan
Rudolph. It seems an Indian Muslim girl was asked to participate in a
small community drama about the life of Lord Krishna, the Hindu god
adored by shepherdesses, who dance for his pleasure (and who exemplify
through their passion the quest of the devout soul for the lord.) Her father
forbade her to dance as a shepherdess with the other schoolgirls. In that
case, said the drama’s director, we will cast you as Krishna. All you have
to do is stand there in the usual Krishna pose, a flute at your mouth. Her
father consented, and so the Muslim girl played Krishna. (105)
Everyone living in India knows well that Bombay (now Mumbai) is more famous as a celluloid city which is synonymous to Bollywood--a city of producers, directors, artists and film stars. This tinsel town is a big site of business and, simultaneously, is famous for its snobbery, its huge spendings, its creation of huge illusions, its escapist entertainment and its yellow journalism, scandals and hypocrisy.

Show Business deals in great analytical accuracy with the central socio-cultural feature of the life of the common Indian. Actually he lampoons the Indian film industry for its artificiality and superficiality, the frames have stuck into rich boy meets poor girl or vice-versa or boy meets girl and love at first sight:

It’s impossible: all these rich girl-poor boy fantasies the, Hindi films churn out fly in the face of every single class, ‘caste and social consideration of the real India. ‘Just giving the lower classes the wrong ideas’, Dad growled, not entirely in jest. After all, the dramatic rise in what the papers call eve-teasing, which is really nothing less than the sexual harassment of women in the street, isn’t entirely unconnected with Hindi films . . . the lout thinks he’ll get the rich girl just as you do in the movies.Except that in real life, the rich girl won’t look at him, let alone sing duets with him.

(248)

The story of Show Business charts the career of a socially well-placed but indigent theater actor Ashok Banjara, who decides to abandon his safe place in politics and aspires to be a superstrar in Hindi cinema. Somehow to his surprise he succeeds almost at once, and his second film, Godambo, launches him into the role of a dashing matinee idol virtually overnight. This Bollywood star Ashok Banjara is hero of Godambo, Judai, Dil Ek Qila, Mechanic. In his last movie Kalki , he is critically ill, fighting for his life in the intensive
care unit of one of Bombay’s hospitals. He is able to relive his career for us and his reverie is the main source of narration:

Me, Ashok Banjara, best-educated actor in the Hindi film world, former Member of Parliament, man of action who gave both ‘man’ and ‘action’ a new definition, Bollywood’s first megastar and most articulate of interviewees, lying in a hospital bed festooned in tubes and drips and bandages, listening to the hate and frustration and regret of a motley cast of characters from my life. (303)

India is a land of drama indeed; most of 7,00,000 villages of India have local fairs, festivals, tamashas (spectacles) and celebrations. There are also sequestered villages inhabited by specific groups of performers, acrobats, animal trainers who bring their troupes for street shows in cities and towns. The thousands of caste subgroups have their own festival calendars, in which dance and singing play a prominent role. Nearly every Jatra (holy pilgrimage) is also a cultural pageant. Then there are organized performing arts that have a highly evolved grammar of their own. Each major temple has its own annual celebration of its presiding deity with music concerts, mela (fair), rath (chariot) pulling, animal shows, sacrifices, etc. In addition, there are itinerant performers who represent the cultural variation of nomadism. All this has been going on for centuries on riverbanks to propitiate the river deity, or in temples and on hillocks. Modernized towns and cities of India do not have a fraction of the immensely diverse traditional ‘mass’ entertainments that the countryside witnesses round the year. Indian films, with all their limitations and outright idiocies, represent part of the hope for India’s future, represent the prime vehicle for the transmission of popular cinema has consistently reflected the diversity of the pluralist community that makes this cinema. The stories they tell, are often silly, the plots formulaic, the characterizations superficial, the action predictable,
but they are made and watched by members of every community in India. Muslim actors play Hindu heroes, South Indian heroines are chased around trees by North Indian rogues. Representatives of some communities may be stereotyped but good and bad are always shown as being found in every community. This fosters a feeling of communal harmony in our society. Tharoor proves his point by giving the example two superhit or megahit films viz. *Zanjeer* and *Amar, Akbar, Anthony*:

In the film [*Zanjeer*], Pran played Sher Khan, a red-bearded Pathan Muslim who exemplified the values of strength, fearlessness, loyalty and courage. This was just a year after the bloody birth of Bangladesh in a war in which most of the subcontinent’s Pathans were on the other side, but far from demonizing the Pran figure, the film-makers chose not just to portray a strong Muslim character but to make him the most sympathetic presence in the film after the hero. This would not have been possible in many other countries, but Bollywood has tended to be consistently good at this sort of thing. That other 1970s megahit, *Amar Akbar Anthony*, for instance, was an action adventure film about three brothers separated in infancy who are brought up by different families--one a Christian, one a Hindu and one a Muslim. As adults, one is a policeman, one a street-fighter and one a qawwali singer. How they rediscover each other and turn the tables on the villains is why the audience flocked to the film in their millions; but in the process they also received the clear message that Christians, Hindus arid Muslims are metaphorically brothers too, seemingly different but united in their common endeavors for justice. (*TTETTT 111*)

It is no exception that Indian films mirror the social, political and cultural realities of common Indians. So it is not surprising that Shashi Tharoor lampoons the Indian film
industry for its artificiality, superficiality and occasional hypocrisy and uses the conventional framework of a rich boy meeting a poor girl or vice versa or love at first sight. However, in Bollywood, this love at first sight is looked at with disapproval and hatred. It invites lots of fighting sequences but finally, everything ends on a happy note. Highlighting the importance of the novel and its salient features Bashiruddin opines that it is a postmodern satirical novel of India which “confirms Shashi Tharoor’s reputation as one of India’s most important voices. It also confirms Tharoor’s status and fame as a writer of world stature” (29).

The transition of Ashok from a romantic hero to the leader of the masses finds many echoes in India’s political history. Ashok is now a politician and Tharoor is reminding us of the great Indian contemporary fact that film stars have turned politicians—N. I. Ramarao, MGR, Sunil Dutta, Amitabh Bachchan, Rajesh Khanna, Shatrughan Sinha, Vinod Khanna, Raj Babbar, Govinda and recently and most astonishingly Smriti Irani (our current HRD minister in NDA government) and so on and so forth. The savvy Indian hero is an instant hit with the popular masses not only in ‘reel’ life but also in ‘real’ life, so Ashok becomes the messiah for the common man. But it is common man’s knowledge that the political avatar is the hypocritical man. Placing Ashok’s film career and political aspirations in perspective, Tharoor portrays Ashok as a frustrated man. Here the seeds of destruction are sown. Ashok makes an appalling film, Mechanic, ostensibly to dramatize his newfound piety and proper humanitarian principals, but the film turns out instead to be his first flop. It is enough to get him elected, but he discovers fame in Bollywood does not parlay into success in political life. He is only an ineffective backbencher. Soon the party bosses use him to stash away funds in this Swiss-bank account and this is exposed leading to his resigning from politics. Here Tharoor is eluding to the famous Bofors case and related financial scandals where Indian politicians and actor Amitabh Bachchan were
involved. Ashok’s return to films is low, key he tries to revitalize his film career but discovers he cannot get a part: “So Choubey had called me for an appointment in the morning with every intention of keeping me waiting till he had woken up. That’s the way you treat aspiring actresses and perspiring journalists, not superstars. I feel a deep surge of anger arid humiliation well up within me” (SB 280-281).

No producer wants to help Ashok, in desperation he agrees to start his comeback in an even lower rung of the Indian film industry by starring in a quasi-religious film, a ‘mythological’ playing the god Kalki, avatar of Vishnu, who has come to right – the wrong and visit destruction on the corrupt and evil. In the course of filming a crowd scene Ashok’s flaming sword causes his horse to bolt. He is thrown down, the flames ignite some costumes and the entire set is torched, with dozens of fatalities ensuing:

The crowds outside the studio were great; inside, the massed ranks of actors, extras, technicians, production executives, delivery boys, hangers on . . . . Ashok, proud of his record of never having employed a double for any of his stunts began his canter on the white stallion . . . . a flame seemed to spurt from the sword singeing the horse . . . . out of its rider’s control. Ashok Banjara fell . . . . When it was all over, the destruction was complete. The smoldering remnants of the set turned up twenty-seven bodies, including that of the producer, Murthy. Another twenty-three were admitted to hospital . . . . but he survived (291-92)

In one of his perceptions on the art of film making Tharoor throws light on the use of the ‘double’ in acting out dangerous stunts. These so called doubles are pathetically paid young men and women who are either crazy for cinema or wish to earn a living at the expense of the danger to their life. The double is of no consequence; even the hero does not acknowledge his existence on the sets. In the West certain daring Hollywood actors
do their own stunts and Ashok also did his stunts. This incident is reminiscent of a near
total tragedy that stalked Amitabh Bachchan during the shooting of a film *Coolie*. In the
novel we see Ashok in coma after being badly injured and lying in a hospital, visited by
family and friends and *Kalki* remains unfinished. The portrayal of Ashok is both
affectionately and fiercely done. He is quite prepared, when required, to act in a film that
includes both his wife and mistress, his relation with the loathsome gossip columnist for
Showbiz magazine, in the interest of getting his name mentioned more frequently:

> But I’m obviously not trying hard enough, for my lips remain locked on
> hers and I am aware of the pressure of her teeth. They feel as if there are
> about two thousand of them, each as large and strong as a key on Gopi
> Master’s harmonium. She must chew *neem* twigs before breakfast, and
> unfortunate actors after. As I try to move she half rises, mouth still glued
to mine, and pushes me down with a firm hand. Boy, she’s strong. The
> other hand is pulling my T-shirt out of my waistband. Christ, this is
> serious! (71)

Yellow journalism or bedroom journalism, the photographers peeping into the private life
of the star has also become fashionable in Bollywood. The natural outcome of this
activity is the friction in the family life of the film stars. They are also human beings who
are entitled to private life but once they become celebrities the press will not leave them
alone. Another contradictory feature is that the star wishes to hog the limelight and
welcome all kinds of publicity just to be in the news. So the star’s life is an open book for
anyone to read. The magazine Showbiz is the creator of Ashok Banjara, the filmy press
can create a hero and also disown him. Ashok Banjara is a careful creation of Showbiz.
Tharoor makes innovative use of music. These days, apart from the uninspiring plots, the
whole film is sustained by new sound track, music and dances, which appeals to the
younger audience. In Bollywood there are only extremes of characterization, on the one hand the dashing debonair action hero and on the other the villain and the essential ‘Bollywood masala’ then revolves round family tragedies, the hero’s sister, hero’s poor mother and all these provide tear-jerkers for the film. The action hero that is Ashok in a larger than life image is a total deviation from reality in real life; one does not find the hero crashing in on every scene of injustice but for the masses he is, the savior:

The triumph of right over wrong, he said. The victory of dharma. The reassertion of the moral order of the universe. Ashokji was the upholder of Right: for this reason, he was like an avatar of God. The other avatars, Rama, Krishna, maybe even Buddha and Gandhi, are all worshipped, but they lived a long time ago and it was difficult to indentify really with any of them. Ashok Banjara, though, lived today: his deeds could be seen on the silver screen, for the price of a day’s earnings. And it was as if God had come down to earth to make himself visible to ordinary men. For me, sahib, he said, Ashokji is a god. (SB 255-56)

Even the very first and superficial reading of the novel reveals the detail account of the life and experiences of a filmi superstar both in the Indian film industry and in the Indian Parliament. However, the author’s extensive and extended use of satire in the story makes it more funny, clever and a pointed manifestation of India’s glamorous social and political realities. Show Business is, in fact, an exposition of a highly entertaining continuum of Tharoor’s conscious and deliberate desire to reinvent and reveal India to himself and his readers. Once again acquainting himself with his country by perceiving it through the cinema produced by her people, Tharoor dwells upon another crucial nuance contributing to the contemporary and modern essence of Indianness -- the circumstances dominating
the nation’s film industry and film fraternity—which plays a powerful role in influencing the people and their thought process.

Bollywood provides the setting for Show Business. Its story charts out the career of a socially well placed, though not so affluent, theatre actor, Ashok Banjara, who decides to abandon his sincere attempts to bring Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter to a few dozen aficionados in favour of the lucrative and glamorous road to the colossal fame of a megastar in Bollywood. Almost an instant success in the film industry with his second movie Godambo, Ashok is elevated to the stature of a dashing matinee idol virtually overnight. From then on there is no looking back for him, and he moves undeterred from one success to another. He marries Maya, his co-star and an excellent actress, and fathers a set of triplets. His professional career includes fifty conventional movies replete with the mundane, meaningless and hollow messages decorated by shallow verse. Apparently, with his growing success Ashok acquires a lot of illegal wealth, which he salts away in a Swiss bank account. Ashok gradually distances himself from his family and his morals during his journey to success and fame and moves on the path of money making and carnal pleasures.

Tharoor both glorifies and lampoons the very idea of an Indian’s existence in the sense of reality and fantasy. In the Bollywood industry outmoded concepts of morality persist as myths in the Indian psyche. Shashi Tharoor asks a question: “I also looked at stories . . . in two cases, of the popular film industry. Why? Because . . . films still represent the principal vehicle for the transmission of the fictional experience. Other than your grandmother telling you the stories on her knee, you go off and get your fiction by watching a movie. So I ask the question, what do these stories tell to Indians? What do they tell about Indians?” (Kreisler). He himself has answered this question in Show Business:
In all Hindi films there is only one theme -- the triumph of good over evil. The actual nature of the evil, the precise characteristics of the agent of good, may vary from film to film. The circumstances may also change, as do the stories in our Puranas. The songs vary, as do our religious bhajans. But there is no duality between the actor and the heroes he portrays. He is all of them, and all of them are manifestations of the Essential Hero. Therein lies the subconscious appeal of the Hindi film to the Indian imagination, and the appeal, alongwith it, of the Hindi film hero. (213)

The teeming millions of Indian society that throng the movie temples lustily look for three hours of ‘reel’ life unlike ‘real’ life to men and women with beautiful faces and provoking bodies so Bollywood sell dreams just as Raj Kapoor has exclaimed ‘nobody wants to see reality and so I am selling dreams’. Raj Kapoor sold the perfect mixture of morality with masala as in his most famous movie Ram Teri Ganga Maili, so he put religion along side sensuality and presto! The product was a three hour Bollywood film with myriad dream sequences. This explains why: “the bulk of the people are deeply influenced by the films they have (seen) -- they believe in these dreams more uncritically than any other audience in the world. To forget the squalid reality of his own life, a poor man will visit the cinema every day” (qtd. in Takhar).

Focusing on the Indian film industry and polity, as creative and natural metaphors for the dominant concerns of the people of the subcontinent, Tharoor exquisitely catches the contemporary picture of India in Show Business. Thus narrating a story involving a variety of tales and circumstances that the people of India easily identify with, Show Business effectively portrays the social, political and cultural environs of the subcontinent characterized by the hypocrisy dominating its Mumbai based filmdom and its Delhi based polity.
The hundreds of popular Hindi films belched out of the numerous Bombay studios provide the purest form of distraction for the hundreds and thousands of Indian viewers who watch them each year. Many of these films are the stuff of dreams with their highly unrealistic storyline and peripetia, just like Indian mythological or ‘theological’ films as Rushdie calls them. Tharoor also compares Hindi movies to a new religion:

Indian cinema has many remarkable affinities to Indian religions Hinduism is agglomerative and eclectic: it embraces and absorbs the beliefs and practices of other faiths and rival movements. It co-opts native dissenters--Buddha, Mahavira--and plagiarizes foreign heresies, finding the Protestant work-ethic, for instance, in the \textit{Karma-Yoga} of the Bhagavad Gita. The Hindi film is much the same: it borrows its formulae from Hollywood, its music from Liverpool and its plot lines from every bad film that Hong Kong has ever produced . . . . The Indian film is the idealized representation of the Indian attitude to the world. \textit{(SB 211-12)}

The world’s largest film industry is not situated on the Western littoral of the United States of America but can be found, a couple of oceans away, in India-in Mumbai: “The Bombay (Mumbai) film industry is a prolific dream-machine. Bombay, that super-epic motion picture of a city” \textit{(Moor’s Last Sigh, 129)} a microcosm of India, is the teeming film capital of the country. According to Vijay Mishra, more than 700 films are produced per year, making ‘Indian cinema (rank) among the country’s top ten industries” \textit{(Takhar)}. To be precise, year in and year out, hundreds of gaudy, fantastical, escapist, preposterous action musical-romance-epics are churned out to entertain the subcontinent’s movie-obsessed masses. It is Hollywood, it is Bollywood, its film-film land, and it’s \textit{Show Business}. Popular cinema in India is the new home of the non-rational in India who received scant attention in the past. Popular cinema is a collective fantasy, a group dream,
a bridge between desire and reality, a vehicle of hope, a healer of trauma and a cleanser of the soul. One can locate the reason for the ubiquity of fantasy in the Hindi cinema in the realm of cultural psychology rather than in the domain of the socio-economic. In India the child’s world of magic is not as removed from adult consciousness as it may be in some other cultures. Indians maintain more troops at the narcissistic position. Hindi films seem to provide this regressive heaven for a vast number of our people.

But in Bollywood this love at first sight meets with societal disapproval, strenuous fighting sequences follow and finally all is well that ends well, garnished with plenty of running around the tree song - sequences and the sweet dish is ready for public consumption, this is a never die formula that inspires numerous Mumbai producers. A new definition of entertainment has evolved: “Artificial? I asked incredulously. ‘What do you mean, artificial? Isn’t all acting artificial?’ ‘You know, all that running around trees, chasing heroines, Singing songs as you waltz through parts. You know what I mean.’ ‘That isn’t artificial, that’s mass entertainment” (06).

Echoing Karl Marx’s dictum that ‘religion is the opium of common people’ and watching the penchant for cinema of common mass in the country like India, we can say that cinema, in contemporary times, is the opium of the masses; senses are dulled on this lulling formula. Tharoor descends on Bollywood like a falcon surveying the scene.

His presentation of the Bollywood star in the Show Business is like a case study giving credibility to the haunting world of another reality. The narrator has responsibility to report the case accurately and this prevents him from using either unconventional language or experimental modes of narration. The characters of Tharoor have deeper connections with the social world and are more susceptible to its corruption. The Upanishads, the Ramayana, and the Mahabharata offer guidance to Tharoor.
In his *Show Business*, he quotes a verse from Valmiki’s *Ramayana* through a character named Ashwin wherein he teaches what *Dharma* is to his brother Ashok and tells him that life without regrets is a life lived without introspection. Thus, *dharma* has been incorporated within the text, as a conducting paragraph in *Show Business*.

The concept of Purushartha occupies a central place in Indian philosophy. It is divided into four constituents *viz.* *Dharma*, *Artha*, *Kama* and *Moksha*. Indian philosophy sees the material or physical existence of human beings on this planet as a prison, the specific term used for it is ‘Bandhan’ and considers ‘Moksha’ or salvation as the ultimate aim of human life. ‘Bandhan’ entails the cycle of birth, death and re-birth and, simultaneously, pains, troubles and tortures of life. But our philosophy also offers a solution and it is the attainment of ‘Moksha’ or complete freedom. Actually, Purushartha is a way to attain ‘Moksha’. The very first step in the way of attaining moksha is ‘Dharma’. Dharma, I think, is the most alive, eternal, flexible and untranslatable word or term in Indian culture and philosophy because it contains multiple meanings and hence multiple interpretations. However, it has been misinterpreted by many scholars. Dharma has nothing to do with a particular religion but, being irrespective of any religion, it shows its relation with every existing human being and even inanimate things. Dharma changes according to the nature, place, time, context and behavior of a particular thing or person. And so it is eternal and flexible. Actually it describes the basic nature or qualities of a person or thing which gives that thing or person an identity. Tharoor has dealt with the concept of Purushartha in *Show Business* to a great extent. Some pages (214 to 222) have been impressively coloured by Tharoor on this very concept Purushartha, prakriti, purus and dharma. We find a good aura of discussion and, simultaneously, they help in understanding the psyche of the author. On moksha Tharoor writes: “Moksha or salvation is the thing – the idea is not to seek forgiveness for sin and liberation from guilt but to
escape ultimately the entire human condition, to be liberated from space and time and the endless cycle of birth and rebirth” (SB 219).

D. Samrajya Lakshmi defines and categorises dharma and observes:

_Dharma_ stands for principle of cosmic order and moral harmony which sustains and supports the universe as one unified orderly whole. It is the law of being by virtue of which a thing is what it is. It is an expression of the essential nature of each being, and to maintain orderliness and harmony in the universe, each being must remain in conformity with its own dharma. Inanimate objects and non-human creatures naturally follow their own dharma, the law of their nature. But man as the unique possessor of free will is capable of defying it. And therefore, in his case dharma not only stands for essence of his nature but also acquires a prescriptive connotation emphasizing its moral and obligatory aspect. In this sense, dharma is conceived as the most fundamental moral norm grounded on the essence of human nature, prescribing duties and obligations accordingly, so that justice, order and righteousness can be maintained in the universe. Thus it is both the principle of Reality as well as Ideality . . . _Dharma_ is divided into three categories: Sanathana dharma or eternal law, Varnashrama dharma and Svadharma or moral conduct of the individual . . . All these three varieties of dharma are, in reality, so close to one another that they cannot be separated. (Lakshmi, Concept of Dharma in Shashi Tharoor’s Show Business 93- 94)

_Dharma_ is also one of the most important themes with which Show Business is concerned. Commenting on the role of dharma in the first two novels B. S. Lakshami rightly says that Tharoor explores dharma again and again through the situations, settings
and characters. His preoccupations are essentially abstract. The choice that a man has to make to remain true to himself, the corrosion of values in a world that puts to premium on material success, the human price of ambition in a competitive society and the possibility of making an authentic decision in a set up where an individual is allowed very little freedom—these are the recurrent concerns running through his two novels. In the same article she further observes:

Shashi Tharoor shows his Genius in creating various characters performing different types of ‘Dharma’. In Show Business the novelist shows how the hero, Ashok Banjara fails to perform his ‘Dharma’. In this novel ‘Svadharma’ is better stressed through different characters related closely to the central character Ashok Banjara where as in The Great Indian Novel, he discusses the ‘Sanathana Dharma’. Through his novels, the reader realized the meaning of ‘Dharma’; the ‘unreal’ nature of material reality and also the fact that “from dharma comes success”. This novel also highlights the degeneration of India from dharma to adharma, nobility to brutality. (23)

Shashi Tharoor is using the concept of Dharma in a broader sense. He has derived this concept from the Hindu scriptures where there are various forms of Dharma. Hinduism does not advocate a monistic view of Dharma. Rather, the word is loaded with meaning to suit every occasion and life in its various discussions. He deals the matter of dharma very seriously in his novels. Hovering on the relevance and role of the big issues in Indian society like secularism in religion and dharma in Purushartha (particularly adhering to dharma). Writing about these issues in one of his articles Tharoor very categorically and emphatically avers:
So irreligion was not the issue; every religion flourishes in India. In my *The Great Indian Novel* in 1989, I even argued the case for restoring dharma its place in Indian public life. One reader, the retired director-general of police of Tripura, B.J.K. Tampi, wrote to assert the broad meaning of dharma. ‘In Hindi,’ he writes, ‘*dharma* means only faith or religion. But in Sanskrit the word has a pre-eminently secular meaning of social ethics covering law-abiding conduct.’

Fair enough: in fact, in an afterword to my novel I had listed a whole series of meanings that have ascribed to the term ‘dharma’ – an untranslatable Sanskrit term that is, nonetheless, cheerfully defined an unitalicized entry in many an English dictionary. (The Chambers Twentieth-Century Dictionary defines it as ‘the righteousness that underlies the law’). I agree with Tampi that no one-word translation (‘faith’, ‘religion’, ‘law’) can convey the full range of meaning implicit in the term. ‘English has no equivalent for *dharma*,’ writes P. Lal, defining dharma as ‘code of good conduct, pattern of noble living, religious rules and observance’. In his *The Speaking Tree*, Richard Lannoy actually defines dharma in nine different ways in different contexts. These include moral law, spiritual order, sacred law, righteousness and even the sweeping ‘the totality of social, ethical and spiritual harmony’. Indeed, dharma in its classic sense embraces the total cosmic responsibility of both God and Man. (*TETTC* 81-82)

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Indian Novel, he discusses the Sanatana Dharma. Through this novel, the reader realizes the meaning of Dharma, the “unreal” nature of material reality and the fact that ‘from dharma comes success’. This novel also highlights the degeneration of India from dharma to adharma, nobility to brutality.

In Show Business, the confused and inconclusive quest of Dharma makes us aware that the essential confusion lies in the mind of the central character and thus nothing can satisfy his strange discontent. Pranay’s love for Maya is not merely a physical one as he understands her inner longings and acts as an oasis in the desert of her life. However, though a villain on the screen, he proves himself a good friend of Maya. He loves Maya from the beginning until the end, until she accepts him. He encourages, advises and accompanies her whenever she is in need. In Pranay, we can notice a genuine friend who can transcend personal disappointments. The Sneha Dharma, the duty of a friend, is embodied in him. It is in that light his attraction to Maya is not based on sex. It is one soul responding to another soul recognizing its duty dharma, to help the other.

Ashok’s father Kulbhushan Banjara is indirectly successful in fulfilling his paternal dharma. He wants a son to be in a good position. He tries to discourage his son at every faulty step in his life especially when his son decides to enter politics. He even argues on behalf of his daughter-in-law and asks his son to perform his duties towards her. He does applaud Ashok when he does well in films, but he is not overwhelmed by it. However, when this great industrialist and the Minister of State for Minor Textiles sees his son on the deathbed, he stands dumb founded. He pleads with his son to start his life afresh. Though Ashok fails to fulfill his dharma as a brother, Ashwin, his younger brother, does it successfully, advising him and always backing him up whenever he is in need of support. He looks after him when he is in hospital. He reminds Ashok of his duties and
educates him of his faults. His brother Ashwin reads for him a message given by a guru in Sanskrit (The *Ramayana*) and says:

> From *dharma* comes success, from dharma comes happiness, everything emerges from *dharma*, *dharma* is the essence of the world. Is that all? I asked him. Is that the message? And he said, tell him that *dharma* is what life is all about, the upholding of the natural order. Tell him that whatever he did was in fulfillment of his *dharma*. Tell him to have no regrets.

I am passing it on, Ashokbhai, but for what it’s worth, I think it’s too easy. One has to have regrets. I have regrets. A life without regrets is a life lived without Introspection, without inquiry. That’s not a life worth living. (*SB* 300)

These are the last words of the novel in which Tharoor focuses on the meaning of life. Maya understands that it is too late to speak to him. She tries to bare her heart to him but is at loss for words for Ashok. While everybody assumes that in his unconscious state Ashok does not sense his or her feelings, the reality is different. Surprisingly, Ashok senses the feelings of his kith and kin, when they came to visit him. He is shocked to discover that Maya, his humble obedient wife, could have someone beyond him and bear a child for that man. He wishes to scream that Pranay is playing a villain in real life. However, the doctors do not understand what he wants to say. He believes that he receives true love only from his fans. They are the ones, who could truly love him, for the characters he played on the screen. He wants to see them and believes that their faith would instill new life into him. He is unable to respond to the commands of the doctors. In addition, they labeled him inconclusive. The introspection of Ashok gives us a better picture of his inconclusiveness. “Like my life, I don’t know what they can do to give that
back to me; I feel it slipping away, like the wet sari of a dancing actress. For the moment I hold it in my hands, I can feel its texture and its wetness... And that in the end the rain will still keep coming down, the music will continue playing but I will be left holding nothing but my own emptiness” (SB 304).

Thus, Ashok is successful as a character in the film but not as a man who fails to perform the different roles of dharma. The false life which has fetched Ashok a large fan-following, publicity and wealth instills into him a dharma by which he has to live up to the image he has built into the minds of his fans, regardless of how it ruins his domestic harmony. He wears a mask and becomes it, justifying Mehnaz’s words, that it does not matter how a film hero is, as a father or a husband so long as his public image is sustained and protected, he thinks he is following svardharma. There may be a ruthlessness about this selfish pursuit but the urban man with a frail value system to fall back upon, views life as a game which he has to play to succeed, no matter how success is achieved. Having achieved it, he must preserve it. Sometimes such a false life may be an escape from personal failures at the domestic level. Then a false sense of dharma supersedes the real dharma. So long as he can remain in the eyes of the public as a Megastar, it is enough. “Let me”, he seems to tell himself ‘live it’.

The actor has the image that the public create for him. So he must be true not to himself, but to his outer self, killing his own inner self. He believes on his deathbed, that if his fans see him, it would instill strength in him. Hence the news of his death was not revealed to the people who continued to believe that death would not and could not touch him. This is the strength that a film star derives from his public pose. Should he not be true to it, to the exclusion of all other dharmas?

The novel may be viewed, then, not as an indictment against the lapses in dharma but as an exploration of what dharma is at a particular point of given time. Show Business
portrays such a fine picture of dharma. The modern man is concerned with himself rather
his own self, and therefore, whatever is beneficial and conducive to his own welfare is
taken to be his dharma. Collective dharma is supplanted by the individual dharma. So
Ashok Banjara cannot relate himself to the members of his family or to his friends. He
must be the cynosure of people’s eye. His filmy heroic stature is his personality. That is
how his fans see him and that is what he has to nurture, sustain and protect. In order to
maintain this image whatever he does, even if it goes against dharma as it is understood
in its larger and solid sense, is his svadharma. Tharoor may feel sorry and even be angry
that such a noble idea has been devalued and degraded. However, as a social observer and
novelist, he knows the limitations of human beings.
What is more important in this novel is that the main characters are public figures and
with figures of such mind, there is always a dichotomy. Two considerations weigh with
such people, one personal and the other public. These two considerations could be
described as what benefits a person and what he can give to the public. In the case of a
person engaged in public service, the world will expect him not to mind personal
inconveniences in order to serve the public and do what is good for it, thereby
subordinating personal interest to public good. However, in the novel, the chief characters
set their own personal interests to the public good. This is a clear reversal of the dharma
in the conventional sense. Dharmo rakshati rakshitah, ‘Dharma protects one who
protects it’ is the traditional maxim (Upanishad). Dharma is here used in the sense of
public cause. However, in the novels, this maxim is reversed. The chief characters take
dharma as that which benefits them. Therefore, they protect that narrow selfish dharma
so that it protects them. Therefore, what Shashi Tharoor is driving at in the novel under
study is, that living as we do in modern times, where the individual’s interest is upper
most, a clear distortion of this spirit of democracy, to expect the modern man to conform
to age-old dharma is anachronistic. May be, the novelist regrets the fall of values, but the situation has to be accepted and faced. Man has grown from innocence to experience in the Blakean sense of the terms and it being a necessary part of life and the world we live in, dharma and its connotations are bound to be revised, redefined and even reduced. The satirical tone in the novel is pointer to the need, which is desired by the author.

The effortless rising arc of Ashok’s celebrity status that acts as a wonderful façade for his self indulgent hedonism, reaches its apogee, soon establishing him as the ‘super’, rather ‘megastar’ of Indian film industry. Belonging to a political family Ashok is easily persuaded to forsake his ‘reel world’ and encash his popularity by entering politics. His father--an honest but junior minister in the government, the Minister of State for Minor Textiles--is forced to vacate his seat for his famous actor son. This not only disillusions the father Kulbhushan Banjara, but also his younger son Ashwin who had toiled hard in the father’s constituency expecting to inherit it as his first stepping stone to success in politics. However, Ashok’s eager acceptance of the party’s proposal, irrespective of its effect on his father and his brother Ashwin completely marginalized the two who obviously found it difficult to revolt against this decision and kept mum. Ashwin, however, blames Ashok later for ruining his career and forcing him to always play the second fiddle. While this political venture by Ashok brings to an end the political aspirations of his father and brother, it also at the same time turns out to be the beginning of the end of Ashok’s ‘reel’ career.

Ashok makes an appalling film, Mechanic, ostensibly to dramatize his newfound piety and humanitarianism in his political endeavour. But the film turns out instead to be his first fiasco. Although this cinema based campaign led by Ashok, succeeds in getting him an electoral victory, yet he soon discovers that popularity and fame in Bollywood do not automatically translate into success in politics. This disillusionment is worsened when
Ashok, victimized by the manipulations of his party colleagues, is named in a scandal associated with his Swiss bank account, and is forced to resign from his seat. Adding insult to injury, the reverberations of his political downfall irredeemably tarnish his screen image. Facing penury, Ashok tries to revive his film career but is disgracefully rejected. In desperation he agrees to make his comeback by acting in a quasi-religious film, a “mythological,” playing the God Kalki, come to right the wrongs and visit destruction on the corrupt and the evil. While shooting a crowded scene for the movie, Ashok’s flaming sword causes his horse to bolt, leading to a terrible accident in which many are fatally burnt alive.

Badly injured Ashok is in coma and lies in the town’s best hospital, visited by his family members and friends who knowing that he is unconscious and incapable to react, divulge their feelings for him in separate monologues. At the same time, thousands of fans of the megastar come from different parts of the country to stand outside the hospital and pray for his recovery but in vain, as Ashok never recovers.

It is, therefore, observed that Ashok Banjara’s profession as a film star provides the much needed anchorage to the vividly descriptive mosaic, Show Business. On the other hand his political stint not only breaks the monotony of the novel’s concerns, but also allows the author to unravel the complexities of India’s social fabric, its realities and the political exigencies of an enormous system reeking in equal measure of corruption and expediency.

Ashok hears many voices of his visitors. Interspersed with this is the voice of Pranay, Ashok’s long time cinema villain who in actual life is in love with Ashok’s wife Maya: “I began to think of her (Maya) - well, differently. A day without her seemed to go on for ever; I needed her laughter to shorten the hours. I stopped living with Sunita . . . . She changed meAshok Banjara. Or, perhaps it is true to say I changed myself for her” (58).
Maya has an illegitimate child by Pranay the ex-lover, the fact is known to Ashok: “And yes, I suppose you should know, through a husband less self-obsessed than you would have guessed it a long time ago. That Aashish is not a Banjara. For in the course of discovering her love, Maya, our Maya, bore you my son” (297).

Another visitor is Kulbhushan Banjara Ashok’s politician father, Minister of State for Minor Textiles, who is disappointed to see that his son Ashok first went into films and then joined politics which turned out to be a disaster. Rebuking his son he says, “Go! Go to your films and your sluts and your dancing and kicking! Go--go and destroy something else!” (277).

Mehnaz Elahi, who acted as Ashok’s heroine in several movies and provided carnal pleasures, finds that Ashok hardly any feeling for her. The next visitor is Ashwin, Ashok’s brother, who has been a grassroots political worker - is disillusioned - ‘Wedded to politics: that’s what I was” (249). But Ashwin finds his patrimony - the parliamentary seat held by his father - snatched away by Ashok, but who nevertheless campaigns for his brother. These and several voices, all give us insights into Ashok’s life and career.

From these various points of view we gather that Ashok, the son of an influential politician Kulbhushan enjoys certain privileges: “Ashok Banjara, product of the finest public school in independent India, secretary of the Shakespeare Society of St. Francis College, no less, not to mention son of the Minister of State for minor Textiles” (03).

A business tycoon--producer, Jagannath Choubey promotes Ashok with the intent of getting concessions from the government. In the event Ashok whose acting talents are not very good, becomes the star of ‘Godambo’ and very soon superstar of Bollywood. The novel also takes us to the film sets of each one of the Ashok starrers and we gather that Godambo is the story of how Ashok, a patriotic policeman, brings to book Godambo the
smuggler; played by Pranay, with the help of Abha, ‘Yesterday’s heartthrob, old enough to be Ashok’s mother and just about beginning to show it’” (03).

Abha, the celebrity on the screen, looks like a ninty-year-old woman in real life whose physical relationship disillusions Ashok. He realizes that nothing in Bollywood is what it seems. Everything is make-believe. Ashok’s imagination is the slave of Abha - his first heroine, his first contact with the world of Hindi cinema. Abha initiated Ashok into the realities of Hindi cinema, the lobbying to get roles, the false pretences, the casting couch are all ingredients of Bollywood life.

In ‘Judai’ separation of twin brothers, which has been a very popular theme for almost four decades, another popular theme is the ‘Zamindar’. Abha plays mother to Ashok, who plays a double role--one as an inspector, the other as a slum hero and monkeyman, that is getting a monkey to play tricks. Between them they slice up the Thakur or landlord, played by Pranay, who has been guilty of sending their innocent father to prison and of separating the brothers. The feminine interest in the movie is Mehnaz Elahi, who falls in love with Inspector Ashok, and monkey - man Ashok brings them together, after a grand reconciliation of the family and the destruction of the villains. Such movie scripts are described in between which are the parallels to Ashok Banjara’s life:

It is strange, isn’t it, how so many of the events of your life seemed to parallel your films, and vice-versa. Life imitating art, perhaps--if Hindi films can be called art. The most astonishing thing was your doing that film in which you played a pair of twin brothers, precisely when Maya was delivering your own triplets! Your mother and I never stopped marveling about that. (122)

Ashok Banjara personifies a new kind of hero and lover, the good-bad hero, who reflects the psychological changes in a vast number of people, who are located in a halfway
house--the transitional sector. The good - bad hero is neither overtly emotional like Majnu nor boyishly phallic like the Krishna-lover, he is very much dishum-dishum hero. Dished up with dollops of sentimentality, the Hindi movies churn a mélange of comedy and tear-jerker situations, the emotional catharsis for the viewer is so complete that one feels cleansed. The widowed mother, making carrot halwa and offering tea is popular stereotype. Inspector Ashok comes home to his widowed mother: “Mother asks son to quickly wash his mouth and hands since she has made him - ‘gajar ka halwa’ (25).

The last 15 years of Indian cinema have been dominated, indeed overwhelmed, by Ashok Banjara. His phenomenally successful films have spawned a brand new genre which though strongly influenced by Hollywood action movies such as those of Clint Eastwood, is neither typically Western nor traditionally Indian. Ashok happily works on three films simultaneously. The day is divided into shifts, and the leading actors dart from set to set, film to film, blithely indifferent to story line or even script.

The Banjara hero is the good-bad hero, who lives on the margins of his society. His attachments are few but they are strong and silent. Prone to quick violence and to brooding periods of withdrawal, the good-bad hero is a natural Jaw-breaker, yet will not deviate from a strict private code of his own. He is often a part of the underworld but shares neither its sadistic nor its sensual excesses. If cast in the role of a policeman, he often bypasses cumbersome bureaucratic procedures to take the law in his own hands, dealing with criminals by adopting their own ruthless methods. His badness is not shown as intrinsic or immutable but as a reaction to the deprivation of early childhood, often a mother’s loss, absence, or ambivalence towards the hero in whom “we have with us a man who has sampled Kama, accumulated artha and seeks to fulfill dharma of service to the people” (216).
Describing Ashwin as an ideal candidate for India’s democratic electoral process as opposed to the likes of Pandit Sugriva Sharma, Kulbhushan Banjara highlights the presence of a silver lining to the dark clouds overshadowing the postcolonial Indian polity. Further, these words acquaint the urbanized Ashok with the various drawbacks in the latter’s persona which clearly disqualify him as a true representative of the common masses. However, it is pertinent to mention here that this sermonizing father ironically forgot his own debut as a politician of free India. In one of his monologues, Kulbhushan confesses that he had joined politics not because of his desire to serve the country, but because politics was the only field he could take up as a career: “So I embarked on the only career I’ve really had, political office, and for the first twenty years I almost didn’t have to think about getting elected because we were the party that had won the ‘country its freedom, and in an overwhelming majority of constituencies that was all the voters needed to know” (119). Considering the above quoted confessional remarks, and his own standards of adjudicating his son’s political capability, Kulbhushan Banjara himself was probably as undeserving a political candidate as he reckons Ashok to be.

Tharoor categorically expresses a bathetic fall of the country’s democratic set up which has been farcically reduced to an electoral game of victory and defeat. Thus presenting postcolonial politics as a profession rather than as a service to the nation, he highlights the dilution of the scruples of the Indians who were undoubtedly lucky but unworthy of inheriting an independent and free motherland. This underserved inheritance is underlined in the person of the protagonist of Show Business, Ashok Banjara. Personifying the aforementioned gradual yet continuing fall in the gravity associated with nationalism and patriotism in the person of the megastar and his political compadre, the author satirically exposes the listlessness and the nonchalance obvious in the attitude of the leaders of free India, who compromise the vital national interests for their personal gains without any
qualms. It is through this playful and non serious rendition of the Indian polity during the postcolonial times that Tharoor shows the radical change in the attitudes and the opinions of the leaders of India, who before independence conjoined the country’s interest with their own, but ironically after having attained freedom relegated the former to the ‘margin’, with the latter virtually usurping the ‘centre’ of the society.

In this way, Tharoor’s *Shows Business* emerges as an effective political satire on the degradation and the decadence of leadership governing India years after the ouster of her colonizers. Highlighting an unscrupulous ‘appropriation’ and ‘commodification’ of morals, principles and values in the postcolonial times, *Show Business* underlines that even independent India continues to reek under the despotic rule of the selfish, materialistic and corrupt politicians who remorselessly stoop to break laws so as to retain their power to make laws. This considerably substantiates the view held by postcolonial sceptics like Aidoo who negate the term ‘postcolonial’ as a mere formulation by politicians who intend to divert attention from the discursive inequities in the society and continue to obtain political gains with convenience.

Like *The Great Indian Novel*, in *Show Business*, too, Tharoor establishes a witty connection between two divergent and incommensurable worlds. Amalgamating the real and the fictitious worlds of India -- the worlds of politics and of filmdom -- *Show Business* emerges as a powerful satire resplendent with humour and irony. The comic and satirical rendition of India’s fictional and political realities in the novel is, in fact, a placid yet powerful, demonstration of the role of ‘success’ in the ‘real world’ of Indian politics, and the ‘reel world’ of movies -- both involving involving a sincere search for effective ways of duping the Indian masses.

The protagonist Ashok Banjara is an allusion to the Bollywood legend Amitabh Bachchan. He came on to the screen during the cult of ‘angry young man’ a wave that
brought in the aggressive young hero, a messiah of the downtrodden, socially accepted ‘Robinhood’ who robbed Peter to pay Paul. The extreme popularity of this type of fictional character created a new wave in cinema and swept the ground beneath the feet of every section of cine-goers so much so that all young budding heroes began to imitate the likes of Amitabh Bachchan. The film hero Ashok Banjara has two sides to his personality. We refrain from using the word ‘split’ but prefer to say that Ashok Banjara lives two different types of life the ‘real’ life and ‘reel’ life. These overlapping modes of existence of a hero create in him conflicting tensions, which could very well lead to psychological distress. He projects larger than life image on screen but the same person after removing the grease paint has to confront a reality so different and this could lead to a bewildering sequence of events: “You are not real. None of you is real. This is not real, only the pain is real. And me, I am not real either, and I will never be real again” (306).

The film hero Ashok Banjara is an obvious reference to Amitabh Bachchan but the novelist refrains from confirming it. Though Tharoor has admitted that ‘Ashok Banjara’ was invented in 1972 by a sub-editor at JS magazine in Calcutta, Narayan Ojha, some reviewers and critics have very quick eyes on it and the point does not remain unnoticed:

The protagonist, though claimed to be fictitious, is very much modeled on the life and career of Amitabh Bacchan, the superstar of the Indian film industry. The details of his life, such as his marriage to the budding film heroine, his subsequent bulldozing of his wife to keep her out of films, his brash romances with other screen sirens, the fabulous amounts he received for his rabble-pulling histrionics, his sickness, and his forays into politics, are well known to readers in India; and the reality of that life is far more interesting, complex, and challenging than its fictionalization by Tharoor.

(Agarwal 678)
Amrendra Sharma and Manju Roy rightly observe that in Ashok Banjara one can see the shadow of the life of Amitabh Bachchan: “Both of them unexpectedly survive the injury. The Big Bachchan emerged on the screen as an angry young man and a messiah of the downtrodden. Arguably, he influenced every section of the film lovers and also heroes who began to imitate him in different ways. So, there is a clear echo of real life in Ashok Banjara’s life” (07).

Like most successful stars Ashok Banjara’s debut performance before the camera is disastrous. As luck would have it, his first shot is a rain-song sequence, where both Abha and he are drippingly wet. Ashok winds up shivering in the artificial rain and he is unable to act and dance. Tharoor’s humor intervenes in Ashok’s first scene where in the frame he sneezes as soon as Abha comes near him, the director shouts - cut - retakes are done but before the final shot the heroine quits in exasperation:

I’m in the middle of a film set now and there’s no time for existential self-indulgence. The playback song starts again, I lip-synch my melodic vow of eternal pursuit, and the rain falls through holed buckets, my feet move as they have been taught I reach for Abha in mid-cavort lips moving to the play back lyric. I am hardly aware of it as I look into her eyes, my nostrils flaring in desire, and sneeze.

Cut!

‘Oh Christ, ‘I mutter under my breath, reaching for my handkerchief All hell breaks loose. As I sneeze again I see Abha throwing up her hands and stalking off towards her dressing room. (09)

Even a scene could be set in a bar, but the hero is never to be seen actually drinking anything, it reflects badly on his character, they can become controversial issues but the codes change from generation to generation. Every decade in Bollywood comes out with
new articulations of love, sex and morality. The man-woman relationship undergoes chameleon changes in transition from one era to another. The unstoppable invasion of foreign films to great extent exerts its influence on Bollyhood. In the glamour of arc lights, psychedelic effects of light and sound, the romantic scenes recreated in exotic locales, all these enhance the emotional level of the actor, so we find Ashok Banjara loving his screen ideal.

To have an impressive picture or to get sensuous images, so many retakes have to be done in times. These sexual scenes of clinging cleavages, of singing in the rain are meant for arousal of libidinal desires and all and sundry in the audience enjoy the scene visually devouring the body of the heroine. The fictional locale in the song and dance sequence arouses not only the audience but also the hero and the heroine to a certain physical magnetism. Mehnaz Elahi, a sex siren of the film industry, top heroine of Bollywood who has acted opposite Ashok in most of his movies, is subjected to an identical treatment:

The rain falls, my enthusiasm rises, her blouse falls and rises, and we sing-dance to the throbbing climax . . . . I am still holding her when the whistle blows. I take her face in my hands, and in full view of the entire unit, kiss her full-bloodedly on the mouth. She does not pull herself away from me; I can feel her nipples harden against my shirt. Her tongue darts between my teeth, and my hands caress the small of her back, pressing her body into mine. Our need is so urgent we might have gone on, but the uncharacteristic silence of the unit, which ought to be busy making dismantling noises, reminds us of our audience. (135-136)

It is therefore observed that Shashi Tharoor’s representation of politics in *Show Business* not only envisages corrupt leaders like Sugriva Sharma, who have desecrated democracy by their immoral manipulations, but also portrays leaders like Kulbhushan Banjara and
Ashwin Banjara, who have learned with time to earnestly work for the wellbeing of the people they represent in the Parliament. However, an irony enveloping the sincere and hard working latter class of politicians in India is also highlighted by Tharoor. While Kulbhushan Banjara had opportunistically adopted politics as a profession immediately after independence, Ashwin’s manipulative and calculated political acumen speaks volumes about his perception of Indian polity.

Popular among the people of his father’s constituency as one who understands their problems, Ashwin’s polluted and scheming self surfaces during Ashok’s campaign. In fact, this campaign deftly described in the novel reveals several truths associated with the electoral system of India. One such truth highlighted is the pervasive lack of respect for the democratic system of the country. In fact, Ashwin’s manipulative and measured approach during his brother’s election campaign, is indicative of the humiliating reduction of India’s electoral system to mimicry of a game of chess in pursuit of power. This is clearly revealed when Ashwin satirically remonstrates: “In our country, elections are a popular *tamasha* that occur every five years, a spectacle, an entertainment for the bored masses. People will gather to watch an unusual candidate in much the same spirit as they might stand around to watch a monkey-man performing tricks” (208).

The ever widening distance between Ashok Banjara, the Member of Parliament, and the people of his constituency has been frequently reiterated by Tharoor in the novel. A novice in politics, Ashok who is unable to hide his irritation and discomfiture because of the demands of his new profession, is helped by his brother Ashwin, who accompanies him in his sojourn through the district and meet the people, in an effort to deglamourize the much glamourized image of his brother, and recreate his image as a representative of the common masses. Ashok muses: “But when I ask if all this is really necessary, he (Ashwin) has a reasonable answer: with an opponent like the Pandit, I can’t leave
anything to chance. I need to make myself known to the voters as someone who is not just jetting in from Bombay and expecting to win on my stardom alone” (206).

Further, Ashwin’s analysis of the pre-election political scenario of the constituency and its people in the novel is an obvious instance of an Indian politician’s ‘colonizing’ attitude which unscrupulously divides his country’s people into a few groups. Exemplifying the existence of the British policy of ‘divide and rule’ in a subtle yet influential manner in the postcolonial India, he argues that “the Pandit has too many groups committed to him: the Brahmins because he is a Brahmin, the minorities because he is known as a champion of the minorities, the poor because he can always blame the party in power for their poverty. The latest blow is that, after a national deal between their parties, the official communist party candidate has just withdrawn in his favour, after a national deal between their parties” (207). Through these words the author exemplifies the complacent recognition of the regional, religious, caste all as financial divisions of the Indian society by its own citizens and leaders who never hesitate to betray their own country.

This unpatriotic, rather heretic dissemblance evidenced among the politicians of India is convincingly foregrounded by Kulbhushan Banjara in Show Business, when he equates and draws a parallel between his own profession of a politician and that of this actor son Ashok. Despite having reiterated that they professionally belonged to the diverse worlds of reality and fantasy, he confesses in his monologue:

And yet I suppose our worlds are not that far apart after all. You function amid fantasies, playing your assigned role in a make-believe India that has never existed and can never exist. As a politician I too play a role in a world of make-believe, a world in which I pretend that the ideas and principles and values that brought me into politics can still make a
difference. Perhaps I too am performing, Ashok, in an India that has never really existed and can never exist. (118)

After *The Great Indian Novel*, *Show Business* therefore emerges as the author’s reaffirmation of the irony that while the powerful foreigners had exploited the weak and the subservient ‘natives’ of the Indian subcontinent for their own good during the colonial era, the native leaders of free India continued to practice the exploitative and the self-centered attitude of their erstwhile colonizers in the postcolonial times, at the cost of their nation’s interests.

An analysis of the novel from the postcolonial perspective harbours on these grave concerns which emerge from the author’s deliberations on Indian polity about thirty years after the country’s freedom. Although largely confined to the world of showbiz, the novel has many more subtle yet emphatic descriptions of the circumstances and political situations influencing the lives of the common citizens of India. While *The Great Indian Novel* is an account of the political history of the subcontinent from the days of the colonial rule of the British to the days of the Emergency and Mrs. Indira Gandhi’s return to power, *Show Business* emerges as Tharoor’s sincere attempt at describing the Indian polity during the 1970s. Primarily engaging himself with the political developments that led to the subcontinent’s partition, its aftermath and political leaders from Gandhi to Indira Gandhi in *The Great Indian Novel*, Tharoor uses his second piece of fiction, *Show Business*, to satirically elucidate the corrupt political machinations generally resorted to by the lower rung of India’s political fraternity only a few decades after its birth as an independent nation. The degeneration of the political ideology pervading postcolonial India that Tharoor convincingly established in his first novel is vividly elucidated in *Show Business* as well. Although he deals with fictional characters and circumstances which are person specific and situation specific, as opposed to the grand narrative of *The Great
Indian Novel, yet the polity oriented part of his narration in Show Business highlights the perverted outlook and attitude of the present day Indian politician afflicting the country’s governance. Geeta M. Patil observes and concludes very aptly:

Concerning his novel Show Business it seems that Tharoor was looking for a new creative metaphor to explore aspects of the Indian condition. He considers films to be the primary vehicle for the transmission of the fictional experience to the majority of Indians. The novel explores the Bombay movie industry Tharoor explains the culture of this industry as contemporary myths invented by popular Hindi cinema. He used this myth to portray his perspectives of the diversity contained within India. The ‘Bombay movie industry thus becomes the context for this perspective. A wacky, satirical tale of hits and misses in the worlds of politics and cinema . . . . engagingly presented . . . . Through montage of shooting scripts, narrative and monologues, he invests a fictional world that is a metaphor for deeper concern. (122)

Beyond the hilarity of its parody and satire, then, Show Business is a novel that demonstrates a genuine concern for the ills of contemporary Indian society in a narrative frame remote from most literary tradition. Tharoor himself writes later about his innovative way of narrating the story:

I have always believed that, as the very word ‘novel’ suggests, there must be something new or innovative about every novel one sets out to write; otherwise what would be the point? In the case of Show Business it had to do mainly with the way the novel unfolds. There are three interlocking narratives in each of the sections of the book, or ‘Takes’ as I called them. The first is the first-person narrative of my protagonist, the Bollywood
film star himself, recalling episodes from six different points of his life. The novel begins with him shooting his first film, and ends with him on his deathbed. The second narrative is the story, complete with tongue-in-cheek lyrics, of the formula movie he's acting in at the time, along with other characters from the novel. The third narrative is a series of second-person monologues, addressed to him in hospital by each of these characters: the ‘villain’, the hero's father and brother, his mistress, his wife. The story of the novel emerges through the interweaving of these three narratives. (BIB 33)

The social, political and professional portrayal of India in the novel further establishes Tharoor as an undisputed Indian author, who exemplifies Homi K Bhaba’s postcolonial concept of ‘hybridity’, and authentically portrays the Indian film industry and Indian polity with their various nuances for his readers the world over. He successfully accomplishes this task by using pointed satire which generates both humour and irony. The use of satire in this Bollywood oriented book has enabled Tharoor to recast and reinvent the ideas, the stories, the people and their predicaments in contemporary India, in a light that immediately provokes freshness of the perception. Further, an abundant use of postmodern techniques such as ‘parody’ and ‘pastiche’ increases the scope of the satire pervading the novel.

Essentially an entertainment oriented tale of the film industry, interspersed with film gossip and Hindi film songs, the novel emerges as a splendid piece of postmodern fiction which subjects Hindi films to a series of virtuoso parodies at once faithful, witty and affectionate, replicating the Indian film industry and the lives of its characters. Thus using the postmodern ploy of ‘pastiche’ in Show Business, Tharoor randomly mimics the style
of writing scripts for Hindi films in Bollywood, vividly imbibing all their traits in his writing.

A collage of shooting scripts and monologues, the narrative of the novel is unconventionally structured in a fragmented manner. Interspersing the first person narratives of the protagonist Ashok Banjara, with monologues of the other characters, and with scripts of formulaic Hindi films, the novel emerges as a categorical and a consummate exemplification of Tharoor’s innovative style of writing. Brilliantly divided into ‘takes’, the novel has six ‘takes’ each of two parts-‘Interior’ and ‘Exterior’. While each ‘interior’ consists of the internal reflections of the protagonist, revealing his real self, every ‘exterior’ is a detailed elucidation of his reel life. In other words, Tharoor intelligently divides all the ‘takes’ of his story into the introspections of Ashok Banjara calling them his ‘interior’, and the elaborate elucidation of the latter’s profession, his ‘exterior’. In fact, by adopting this narrative technique he highlights the duality in Ashok’s glamorous and successful life. He further adds colour to the narrative by ending all his ‘takes’ with expressive interior monologues of the different characters of the novel.

Through the postmodern lens, Shashi Tharoor’s Show Business is not only an extension of his postcolonial perception of ‘India as a highly developed country in an advanced state of decay’ but is also a brilliantly engaging book that subtly explores mythical, social, political and cultural aspects of India through the creative metaphor of cinema. His interest in politics and Indian philosophy enables him to dwell on higher level for a long time though it is done in a satirical tone.

Tharoor’s creativity reflected in the innovative combinations of the terms and techniques used during the process of film making in Show Business also make it a wonderful example of a ‘bricolage’. Its eclectic identity that depends on a self conscious and eclectic collection of themes, ideas and styles from the discursive fields of movies and politics,
produces an exaggerated version of the film industry at Mumbai and Indian politics, equally parodying and satirizing the two. Thus dealing with pragmatic themes *Show Business*, which apparently focuses on local effects and conditions rather than on grand narratives and timeless ideals, is not only capable of being perceived as a ‘pulp fiction’ endorsing Baudrillard’s concept of ‘hyper-reality’, but is also an example of Lyotard’s postmodern theory of ‘incommensurability’ that amalgamates the linguistics of the silver screen with that of politics. Through parody and pastiche Tharoor brings films and politics on the same level underlining materialism and dissemblance as the common interests of the society.

Thus the technical experimentation witnessed in *Show Business* is an unequivocal amplification of the effort made by Shashi Tharoor to perpetually entertain his readers. Besides the witty, playful and exuberant renditions of Hindi cinema in the novel, the satirical descriptions of Indian polity, add to the sarcasm evidenced in the elaborate elucidations of the song sequences and lyrics in Hindi movies, showcasing his postmodern proclivities and his ingenuity in creating humour, irony and fantasy.

The connection between politics and films in India is one of the themes the novel explores, within, of course, its fictional parameters. Tharoor thus makes use of cinema as a new metaphor to explore different aspects of the Indian condition. The novelist illustrates the film culture in India against the background of contemporary myths. He selects the Mumbai film world only to present a satirical story of hits and misses in the world of films and politics. In fact, he invents a fictional world to transmit his ideas of deeper concern. Tharoor’s *Show Business* entertains as well as enlightens us about some dark realities of contemporary India. It transports us to a magical world of sensual pleasure and highlights some of the social, cultural and political realities of India. In addition, it reflects the diversity of pluralist society as well as the pleasures, pains,
procrastinations and predicaments of the majority of Indian people. As a matter of fact, even a commercial film-maker contributes towards, and helps articulate and give expression, to the cultural identity of the society. Culture and development, films and identity, are fundamentally linked and interdependent. We have heard in the past that the world must be made safe for democracy. That goal is increasingly being realized; it is now time for all of us to work to make the world safe for diversity.

The novel is a candid representation of the degenerated subcontinent. While in The Great Indian Novel he confined himself to an elite group of leaders of the country, in Show Business he elucidates the profligacy and the corruption, which characterize a majority of India’s politicians. The descriptions of the unscrupulous Sugriva Sharma, the cunning Dr. Gangoolie and the suggestive revelations made by Kulbhushan Banjara are clear evidences of the immorality and perversion afflicting India’s society and polity.

Show Business is an ‘eclectic’ piece of postmodern fiction, banking on technologies ranging from the print media to the cinema, and on diverse themes ranging from films to politics. On the whole, Shashi Tharoor shows his socio-moral vision and mourns for the lack of Dharma in modern times. In a post modernistic world, where there is change in moral standards, very few committed artists with a philosophic vision can wage a strong war against the break-down of basic human values. Tharoor considers his art as a medium through which he tries to resurrect the lost dignity of the human being. Art therefore seems to turn into a didactic weapon by which he reinstates the lost glory of the world. In a society with the “transvaluation of values”, a rigid, inflexible values system is an anachronism. Neither Ashok Banjara nor any character is interested in that rigid system. Sometimes personal interest blinds one’s dharmic eye. Then man falters and makes errors. Of course, the novel has a point; it describes the happenings and mishappenings of our present day society and the novelist mourns at the lack of dharma in our society.
Thus a general evaluation of the present novel brings out that *Show Business* is a pungent satire on Indian polity in 1990s which celebrates the diversity and plural identity of India and its culture through cinema. The narrative follows the career of a famous film star. Tharoor uses film as an appropriate medium for transmitting fictional experience to the Indian masses. Here he invents a fictional world experience of deeper truths; illusion and reality, ambition and greed, love, deception and death. It has mainly explored different aspects of film industry with reality – like seduction, betrayal, politics, intrigues--that makes the story entertaining. The novel sheds light on the decadence and profanity that crept into idealized Indian politics of Gandhi and Nehru. The novel highlights the rampant corruption prevailing in the successive governments and shows how the law makers and the law breakers act in concurrence with one another in the liberated motherland.