

# Shashi Tharoor's *Show Business*: A Reflection of Contemporary Indian Social and Cultural Milieu.

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**Abstract:** Shashi Tharoor has lived, thrived and blossomed in a very modern India. The life and times may have been situational turbulent but from it, he has successfully painted a kaleidoscopic mosaic of Indian life—in its richness, its poverty, its backwardness, diversity, cultural specificity of each state especially his beloved state of Kerala and a multilingual babble of languages or tongues. Tharoor's *Show Business* deals with great analytical accuracy the central socio-cultural feature of the life of the common Indian. Actually he lampoons the Indian film industry for its artificiality and superficiality.

**Keywords:** Bollywood, Diversity, Entertainment, Dreams, Journalism, Hypocrisy, Idolism.

**Introduction:** Shashi Tharoor's *Show Business* deals with the central socio-cultural feature of the life of the common Indians with great analytical accuracy. Actually, he lampoons the Indian film industry for its artificiality and superficiality. The film world embodies the very idea of India's diversity in the way in which it is organized, staffed and financed. Hindi movies are all for escapist entertainment, as long as it serves to communicate the diversity that is the basis of the Indian heritage. They offer all of us a common world to escape, by allowing us to dream with our eyes open. The popular entertainment can unite our diverse communities.

Modernized towns and cities of Indian do not have a fraction of the immensely diverse traditional mass entertainments that the countryside witnesses around the year. Indian films, with all their limitations and outright idiocies, represent part of the hope for India's future, in a country that is still almost 50 percent illiterate, films which represent the prime

vehicle for the transmission of popular cinema has consistently reflected the diversity of the pluralist community that makes this cinema. As Tharoor asserts:

. . . 1970s mega ‘Amar Akbar separated in infancy who are brought up by different families . . . Anthony’, for instance, was an action adventure film about three brothers one a Christian, one a Hindu and one a Muslim. As adults, one is a smuggler, one a street-fighter. How they rediscover each other and turn 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 and Muslims are metaphorically brothers too, seemingly different but united in their common endeavours for justice. (*The Hindu* 8)

The film world embodies the very idea of India’s diversity in the way in which it is organized, staffed and financed. 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 escape, by allowing us to dream with our eyes open. The popular entertainment can unite our diverse communities. Once Tharoor himself admitted in one of his columns that:

American scholars Susane and Lloyd Rudolph once recounted a story that they had heard from an Indian Muslim friend who, as a child, was once asked to participate in a small community drama about the life of Lord Krishna, dancing as a Gopi around the Lord. Her Muslim father forbade it. In that case, said the drama’s director, We will cast you as Krishna. All you have to do is stand there in the classic pose, a flute at your mouth, and the other girls will dance around you. And so the Muslim girl played Krishna. That is the popular

Indian culture from which so many of us have emerged. (Interview by Thakhar)

Shashi Tharoor the maverick writer with a hawk’s eye for detail and newness hardly left any untouched subject of discovery and scrutiny in the Indian social and cultural milieu. The very range of his experiences is stunningly refreshing, each experience and each anecdote and every character is delved into and branded by Tharoor with his own inimitable style of writing. Tharoor lived, thrived and blossomed in a very modern India. The life and times may have been situational turbulent but from it, Tharoor has successfully painted a kaleidoscopic mosaic of Indian life—in its richness, its poverty, its backwardness, diversity, cultural

specificity of each state especially his beloved state of Kerala and a multilingual babble of languages or tongues.

Tharoor both glorifies and lampoons the very idea of an Indian's existence in the sense of reality and fantasy. In the light of T.S. Eliot's observation that human beings cannot bear much reality, so Tharoor also observes that the average Indian flees from reality into the cinema halls and finds solace, happiness and contentment by gifting away small amounts of money (ticket money) to the entertainment industry. The whistling gallery to be found in the front row hugging the screen is the great patronizers of the multi-crore Indian film industries. This section of the cine viewer, audience calls the shots of the entire ethos of Bollywood films. The traditional viewers which form yet another chunk of cine lovers fall in the traditional mould. Middle class values that leaves only a miniscule section of intellectually endowed people. The laboring masses and the traditional folks wish to see dreams and illusions of mythological cultural. The glamorous half clad innocent village, belles ramping around the fields though adolescent who knows everything about the birds and beasts, is atrophied as only sweet sixteen. The middle class morality will dictate that sex is dirty and

her 'Daman', 'Izzat' should not have any 'daag'. Indianisms, in the Bollywood industry out-molded concepts of morality and persists as myth in the Indian psyche. Shashi Tharoor asks a question:

. . . . 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? (Berkeley 14)

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 Hindu film to the Indian imagination, and the appeal, along with it. (Tharoor 24)

The teeming millions of Indian society that throng 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 that 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

prestige. 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 reality of his own life, a poor man will visit the cinema every day. (Boyd 5)

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 perihelia, 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 religion . . . . Hinduism is agglomerative and eclectic: it embraces and absorbs the beliefs and practices of other faiths and rival movements. It co-opts native dissenters—the Protestant work—ethic, for instance in the Karma–Yoga of the Bhagavad Gita. The Hindu film is much the same: it borrows its formulae from Hollywood, its music from Liverpool and its plot lines from every bad films that Hong Kong has ever produced. . . . The Indian film is the idealized representation of the Indian attitude towards the world. (*Show Business* 212)

The world's largest film industry is not situated on the Western frontiers of the United States of America but can be found, a couple of oceans away, in India in Bombay.

. . . . The Bombay film industry is a prolific dream-machine. Bombay, ‘that super-epic motion picture of a city’ a microcosm of India, is the teeming film capital of the country.

(129)

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, Bollywood, film-film land, and it’s *Show Business*. This is the setting for Tharoor’s exuberant and clever second novel. 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 healer of trauma, cleanser of the soul. One can locate the reason for the ambiquity of fantasy in the Hindu cinema is in the realm of cultural psychology rather than in the domain of the socio-economic objective. In India the child’s world of magic is not as a 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.

Shashi Tharoor’s *Show Business* deals with great analytical accuracy 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, love at first sight:

. . . . It’s impossible: all these rich girls—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. 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 Hindu films . . . . Except that in real life, the rich girl won’t look at him, let alone sing duets with him. (Boyd 11)

In Bollywood this love at first sight meets with societal disapproval, strenuous fighting sequences follows 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. (Singh 16)

Shashi Tharoor further exposes various issues related to the film industry. In the film industry the heroes could have liaisons with a number of heroines and starlets. In Bollywood the hero interacts emotionally with a number of leading ladies. With Mehnaz, Ashok's first encounter was in close sexual proximity through a sensuous figure and beautiful face, ". . . For the car door opens, just as it is supposed to, and out steps the most beautiful woman I have ever seen. I am at a complete loss for words" (80). Ashok is a professional actor, who sees his heroines as stepping stones to stabilizing his own future:

You treat most women alike, whether they're sleeping with you, co-starring with you or merely writing gossip columns about you. . . . The casual observer would find it difficult to tell just from your conduct which woman is actually your lover and which is the bitchy columnist you are trying desperately to avoid-without showing it. (*Show Business* 218)

Tharoor has incorporated the protagonists with varied social and cultural concerns. With a buxom beauty like Mehnaz, Ashok flaunts his image as a play boy, so being with her is kind

of publicity stunt which fosters his image of a young romantic hero. Fed up of all this Maya, Ashok's wife one day stages a come back to Bollywood. Tharoor takes a vital clue from a movie *Abhimaan*. The responsibility and effort involved in active wooing, of positivity and dependency upon a woman—urges from the earliest period of life, which, love brings to the fore and intensifies—the withdrawn hero would rather be admired than loved. The film *Dil Ek Qila* became super hit for Maya. The mother of triplet daughters breaks new ground in believing that their only existence is as wife and as mother:

. . . . My life is committed, Maya says nobly. There is no waste in fulfilling my dharma as a wife. But I do not intend to sit idly and let my husband drift away from me. I must have done something wrong. I shall undo it now, and win my husband back. (*Show Business* 179)

Tharoor further brings out some political events and incidents to throw light on the various political issues of the society. Ashok rakes in the fortune as he rides the crest of stardom in the film industry but on the political side something else is brewing, His father now an aged politician has lost his dynamic grip over his constituency; the party is anxious about his victory and expects one of his sons to be an heir of the constituency. Actually Ashwin, the young brother of Ashok, remains unmarried only to serve his father's constituency. In all truth Ashwin should have taken over the mantle from his father but the political *pandits* thought otherwise after a poll survey felt that the vote bank would be theirs only, if a charismatic leader led the party to the polls. The answer was instantaneous, Ashok, fitted the description of the popular man with a local appeal therefore Ashok was chosen to take over the political baton from his father, “. . .after growing up in your shadow all these years, doing all the things you rejected, and finally watching the

biggest prize of my life fall easily into your lap when it was at last within my reach?” (*Show Business* 246).

Tharoor has employed the culture theme of making Deity. 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*. A comatose, badly injured 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:

. . . . My lips remain locked on hers and I am aware of the pressure of her teeth: there seem to be 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 affirm hand, Boy, she's strong. The other hand is pulling my T-shirt out of my waistband, Christ this is serious! (*Show Business* 71)

The novel enlists various ill practices prevalent in the industry. Yellow journalism or bedroom journalism, the paparazzi 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 are rich the press shall not leave them alone.

What one actually finds is misdirected youth having street brawls. These street fights by dagger brandishing youth from the staple of the Bollywood diet. The sophisticated hero as champion of the mass is great deception on the masses. In respect of the heroines in Bollywood the tenure of the leading lady is very short. These heroines constantly face the psychosis of being replaced by younger and more entrants in the Bollywood, our case moves along same line. After achieving the peak point in Bollywood Abha has to play the mother role to keep going in the film industry. Tharoor analyses the various dimensions of film-making direction, production, costume designer, makeup , wardrobe attendant, sets, light boys and the camera:

. . . . When the (Brahma) created women—yes, the female human. He carved her out of his own body, not from a spare rib, you see, we are a vegetarian people. Now in those days Brahma had only one head, that's all he had need of at the time. But he admired his creation, this first woman, so much, and looked at her so ardently, that she felt obliged to hide in embarrassment from his desire. This she tried to do by running away from his line of vision, but if Brahma could create a woman, he could certainly create an extra pair of eyes. So in order to be able to see her wherever she hid, he grew a head on each side, another one behind and even one on top, to complement his original single head. Is this not like the ubiquitous camera of the Hindi film? (Interview by Thakhar)



The novel *Show Business* ends with voices, among them Ashwin is Tharoor's voice, a mouthpiece, being a deep Hindu at heart. Tharoor's words even in *The Great Indian Novel* end up in Dharma. All said and done according to Dharma saves humanity—*dharmadarthaha prabhavati dharmath prabhavate sukham, dharmen labhate sarvam, dharma saarabhnda jagat*. The Guruji also supplied a translation:

. . .from dharma comes success, from dharma comes happiness, everything emerges from dharma and dharma is the essence of the world. . . . Dharma is what life is all about, the upholding of the natural order. (*The Great Indian Novel* 300)

Mohan Ramanan has offered a critique of Tharoor's *Show Business*:

. . . .This is the story, at times entertaining, and usually funny . . . . We take the point that illusion is reality and reality is illusion Politics is like films a tissue of lies. Cinema is politicized and there is no innocence. . . . Tharoor's writing is part of a fictional culture in India where clever writing seems to be the order of the day. There is money in it, witness Vikram Seth's huge profits. There is fame in it, but ultimately it is all show. (120)

This novel is a study of Bollywood, the Hindi films which are the mirrors of Indian culture and traditions:

. . . .What makes *Show Business* particularly impressive and accomplished is its elaborate structure, a mix of first person narration, synopsis of Ashok's dreadful Hindi films and resentful and accusatory monologues by the supporting cast. The effect is to fragment and rearrange the chronology of the rise, fall and rise again of Ashok Banjara in a way that replicates the crazy razzle-dazzle of the Hindu film world, but that also permits Mr. Tharoor to

comment, with telling irony and insight, on the curious parallels between India's unique film culture and the swarming, braffling and beguiling variety. . .the vivacity and corruption, the serenity the chaos, the sophistication, and naïve self-delusion-of India itself. (Ramanan 139)

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 these myths to portray his perspectives on the diversity contained within India. The Bombay movie industry thus becomes the context for this perspective. Through a satirical tale of hits and misses in the worlds montage of shooting scripts, motifs and symbols, he invests a fictional world that is a metaphor for deeper concerns.

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