

## Concept of *Dharma* in Shashi Tharoor's *Show Business*

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### ABSTRACT

*Dharma is the total cosmic responsibility, including gods, a universal justice for more inclusive, wider and profounder than any western equivalent, such as duty. What is Dharma? This is the question that Shashi Tharoor explores repeatedly in his novel; though the situations, settings and characters are sufficiently varied each time to make quests dissimilar. 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 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 novel – Show Business. Shashi Tharoor shows his socio-Moral vision and mourns for the lack of Dharma in modern times. In a Post Modernistic world, where all moral values are gone with the wind, there are very few committed artists with the philosophic vision, who can wage a strong war against the advent 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.*

*Key words: dharma, duty, relationship, philosophy, politics*

### INTRODUCTION

The choice of a topic is, perhaps, as important as the methodology of research. *Dharma* is an essence of life and of interest to Shashi Tharoor and as such I chose to focus my paper on that subject.

Kusum Jain rightly defines *Dharma* in her paper in ‘Human Rights: The Indian Perspective’ that *Dharma* is derived from the root “dhr” meaning to uphold, to sustain, to nourish, to support. In this sense, *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.

Different aspects of *dharma* are classified into two broad categories namely *Sadharana Dharma* and *Svadharmas*. *Sadharana Dharma* refers to those universal duties which are obligatory on all human beings irrespective of various differences pertaining to their race, sex, colour, religion, nationality, culture, profession and even physical and mental capacities. These are eternal moral obligations of man qua man and their fulfillment alone

distinguishes man from animals. Often referred to as *Manav-dharma* (human duties), *Sadharana dharma* includes a list of virtues such as honesty, love, forgiveness, charity, mercy, non-violence, compassion, justice, purity of conduct, self-control, benevolence, simplicity, begetting children and maintenance of dependants. But the essence of *Sadharna dharma* is generally stated as refrain from doing unto others what you will not have done unto yourself.

*Svadharm*a literally means one's *dharma* (duty) which is essentially correlated with *svabhava* (one's specific nature). The inner correlation of *svabhava* with *svadharm*a is expressed in terms of the two aspects of *svadharm*a, the social and the individual. Raja Rao also offers in the glossary to his novel *The Serpent and the Rope* a simplified definition of *Dharma* as,

The Law by which society is governed linked with the transcendental law  
(Raja Rao, 1968; Glossary)

However, *Dharma* is divided into three categories: *Sanathana dharma* or eternal law, *Varnashrama dharma* and *Svadharm*a or moral conduct of the individual. *Sanathana dharma* or eternal law is the principle of harmony that pervades the whole universe. According to *Varnashrama dharma* an individual should perform *dharma* that is particular to his or her *Varna* and *ashrama*, caste and stages of life. *Svadharm*a is the personal moral conduct of an individual. All these three varieties of *dharma* are, in reality, so close to one another that they cannot be separated.

Now one can maintain that *Dharma* is the metaphysical basis for the Indian society. It links the mortal world with an immortal world. An individual, according to *Dharma*, should perform *Svadharm*a i.e., the duty allotted to him or her. But this alone does not account for the order of the universe. He must be able to see the higher principle of order or ultimate reality, and an individual's pursuit of *Dharma* is a means to that end.

Shashi Tharoor uses Hinglish very often in his novels, which is evident through the glossary provided at the end of his texts, and is conventional in his style. Like Narayan and Malgaonkar, he, too, is primarily interested in telling a story, only in his case, the stories, while being firmly rooted in the metropolitan or commercial milieu of later twentieth century Bombay or Delhi are at the same time not so seriously dealt with. In the conventional method of gradual unfolding of a story, the reader's interest is generally centred on the events of the future, i.e., in what will happen next. Tharoor's novels seem to follow this conventional method, but he manages to take the past from the reader and revealing them gradually and in installments at appropriate moments while the story moves forward. Shashi Tharoor's main concern seems to be communication, not experimentation. His interest in technique is limited to merely finding an adequate, not brilliant, method that is suited to the theme. 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*.

Born in 1956, Shashi Tharoor, like most of his heroes belongs to affluent urban elite with no agrarian roots. The commercial world of Delhi forms the setting of his novel, but the novelist manages to incorporate with this setting, the other dimensions of human life, and the other levels of awareness that coexist and clash with it.

## A CLOSE LOOK AT THE NOVEL

*Show Business* by Shashi Tharoor gives us a clear idea of the absence of *dharma* in the lives of the characters of the celluloid world. The title is striking and it suggests the contents of the novel. It projects the lives of film personalities as a hollow spectacle and their lives are portrayed as lacking depth, solidity and therefore leading to the absence of righteousness in films. This is the story of Ashok Banjara, a super star of Bollywood. Though it appears to be a fictitious character, it is by implication the superstar of Bombay.

### ASHOK BANJARA

The core of the novel is concerned with Ashok who is primarily a stage artiste. Later, he has the luck to become one of the superstars of the much-admired Bollywood. The son of a Union Textile Minister, Ashok never once uses or urges his father for any help. Hence, he is a self-made man, but the fact that he is the son of a Minister is enough for cinema Wallahs to pamper him.

Elder son of the Minister of state for minor  
Textiles....our canny film Wallahs seem to have  
adopted the maxim, if don't need him, at least  
feed him –no point offending a Minister(p.8)

By stressing this point, he satirizes the contemporary society, which is a personification of all sorts of bad impulses.

Well educated, thoroughly brought up with a good family background, Ashok Banjara decides to become an actor. He is given a chance to be a hero in Mohanlal Choubey's film. In spite of his experience as a stage artiste, Ashok finds it very difficult to act in the beginning. With the help of a senior actress Abha, he could perform his role and ultimately reaches the top position in Bollywood. Ashok realizes the difference between reality and film artificiality in his first acquaintance with Abha- when he says,

The most famous bust in India is a pair of falsies (p.20).

In every phase, he understands that it is just acting but then, he is at times tempted. After reaching dizzy heights, pride and power slowly creep into his mind.

Slowly he starts dictating terms in prompting young heroines. Ashok is portrayed as a typical male chauvinist who considers women as objects of sex and instruments of pleasure. He fails to understand the human side of their personalities. He hardly shows any concern for his co-artistes. He is both lecherous and selfish. His continuous thoughts about the film world are not because of his dedication to the film industry but to ascend to the topmost position in filmdom. Thus, he is devoid of professional ethics too.

Through a refrain sung by Ashok in one of his roles as a handsome but possessive lover, his character is highlighted:

Let me shelter you from the rain,  
Keep you safe from all pain,  
Let me hide you from the eyes  
of the world (p.133).

The self-centered and egoistical nature of Ashok is highlighted in these lines since as a lover he prefers to be the only one to enjoy the beauty of his lover. Therefore, he has an instinctive zeal to shield his beloved from the outside world.

Ashok as a filmy police officer aspires to take action against the various problems of society. Then he sings:

I am the long arm of the law,  
No one is quicker on the draw,  
Injustice and corruption,

Forces of disruption,  
will be the losers in this war (p.22,36).

As a hero, Ashok has a complete personality, but in life, he is an utter failure since he fails to “play” successfully the various roles assigned to him as a human being, whether it is as a father, a husband or a son. His failure as a human being is as total as his perfection as a hero is complete.

#### ASHOK AND MAYA

In his career, Ashok meets a beautiful girl Maya who first acts as his sister and later as his heroine. She takes a liking for Ashok and therefore he utilizes the situation by marrying her. After marriage, he never encourages his wife in the film field and expects her to be *The Angel in the House*. When he gets a positive report of her pregnancy from the gynaecologist, he is not very happy of becoming a father to his child. However, in a way he is relieved that, it will be a safe escape from his wife. He leaves Maya to her fate for delivery and engages himself in a film shooting. This is clear when Kulbhushan, Ashok’s father says:

The most astonishing thing was your doing that  
film... when Maya was delivering your own triplets (p.122).

Thus, he proves himself as a failure in fulfilling this *Grihashthram Dharma*. As far as his parental *Dharma* is concerned, he plays only a marginal role as a father. Even though he professes to love them, he never has any time to spend with his children probably because of his busy shooting schedule. However, this excuse gives him the cover to keep himself as far away from the family.

#### ASHOK AND MEHNAZ ELAHI

In the course of his career, he comes across Mehnaz Elahi, a beautiful upcoming actress and her beauty enslaves him. He spends much of his time with her and thus neglects his wife. As Mehnaz starts loving him, Ashok is trapped by Mehnaz and starts neglecting his wife, Maya – the latter famous with her girl-next-door appearance and the former more for her glamour. Maya is unable to tolerate this, and so, she shocks Ashok by declaring her reentry into the film world. Ashok tries to oppose her but in vain. She comes back on to the screen once again and gains the hearts of the mob.

#### ASHOK’S ENTRY INTO POLITICS

Ashok does not know what to do with the money he is being paid off the records. His father advises him to put it in Swiss Bank. This black money helps him to become a Member of Parliament (M.P.) in future. Tharoor is thus satirical about the present political figures. No parent thinks of his child as a film actor and Ashok Banjara’s father is one exception. He rejects the thought of his son becoming an actor. He never sees any of his movies and they never share an amicable relationship. Ashok Banjara’s external life is a success all through his career. He was worshipped by fans, surrounded by mobs and had a large following. However, he is not happy with this success.

Ashok wants to become something greater than what he already is and the chance comes when he started entering politics. With the help of his brother, he becomes an M.P and this victory of his is only due to the popularity and following he has as an actor. He makes false promises and while addressing the public he feels as if he is acting in films. His experience as an actor keeps him a great deal in his political life, because both in the film world and the political world the facade matters. Unreality is the real nature, public pose is

more important. He has no feelings and even if he had, he never reveals them to the people. The writer ironically presents the nature of present politicians. With his money and the publicity, he was successful in winning the election. However, as an M.P, he could not do anything for his people, who admired him as a hero only because he is the righter of the wrong in his films. He also could not satisfy the expectations of the political authorities. Even if he was compared to M.G.R( famous Indian movie star) of the south, he realized that he was not up to his standards. He tries to use his film *Charisma* for political campaign. Not being so successful in politics he decided to come back to films. Thus, he proves himself a failure in his political *Dharma*.

The chapter of his political life begins ironically. Though he could not answer for himself why he wanted to enter politics, he tries to win the elections. His brother Ashwin helps him by being his campaign manager and once again, he understands that Maya, his wife is his biggest asset to win the elections. He wins the elections purely based on his following and becomes an M.P. However, the parliament house does not appeal to him. His surprise is genuine when he finds out that he is not in the list of Cabinet Ministers. He was not given a satisfactory answer when he questions about his placement. The parliament session bores him. He does not quite understand what his role in the house is; tired of the sessions of parliament, he thinks of reentry into the films. His secretary supports his idea, and once again, he is back on the silver screen.

The different stages in Ashok's life are described to the minutest detail. There is also an elaborate description of the lifestyle of the celluloid world. The narration also helps us to understand the stress, the strain, and the temptations, the rejections, the difficulties of their family life and the trouble they regularly face in their show business. The temptations Ashok undergoes during his first film shooting also tell us how unglamorous the artists of the film may look without make-up. The dances, the fights, rains and places and further events in *Show Business* are just an illusion. However, it entertains the masses and haunts the imagination of all the sections of the society. Unfortunately, the actors of this make-believe world act not only on the screen, but also in real life. This aspect of cine-life is reflected in the speech of Mehnaz Elahi. She opens her heart to the readers in which she comments:

I think that what matters to you is your image  
The way you see yourself is the way others see  
you. It doesn't matter what kind of husbands or  
father you are, the important thing is that you  
are seen as a husband and father. You are all  
those roles you play on the screen (p.190).

This comment of Mehnaz will succinctly highlight the personality of Ashok and the innocent gullibility of the masses in over-estimating the personality of their hero. There lies the basis of a shallow make- believe world.

#### REENTRY OF ASHOK INTO THE FILM WORLD

The reentry begins with the film *Kalki*. Ashok thinks that it would be a sociological film, but it turned out to be a mythological film. Ashok who does not use a replacement for his stunts, is mounted on a horse and when the stallion starts galloping, Ashok loses control, falls down and is badly injured by the flames, which suddenly ignites from his sword. The blaze voraciously devours wood, canvas, drapes, metal and human flesh. The destruction is complete. The smoldering remnant of the studio turn up twenty-seven bodies, but the Megastar of the silver screen Ashok Banjara who has contusions, concussions, broken bones and burns, but still survives. Actually, Pranay and Ashok had come to the glamour world at the same time, but Ashok became a superstar-hero while Pranay was only suitable for

villainous roles and he remains a villain even in the life of Ashok. In the early days of her career, Maya befriends Pranay who had the chance to know her completely. He begins to like her and he even proposes to her. Maya, on the contrary, loves the Megastar and marries him. After marriage, when Ashok starts taking interest in other women and the emotional bond between them is lost, Maya who is friendless, wishes to have a hearty communications with some intimate friend. She is glad when she gets the patient ear she had longed for from Pranay. Maya still remains the dutiful wife of Ashok but is more comfortable and secure in the presence of Pranay. The more Ashok gets away from her, the more Pranay comes on the screen of her life and at last dominates. He comes to see Ashok in the hospital and grudgingly wishes him a speedy recovery. In spite of his personal hatred for Ashok, he has always been an ardent adviser of the roles that Ashok played on the screen. However, he envies Ashok's possession of Maya. Yet he is also contented with the relationship he has with Maya. This relationship as he says:

is not based on the mere attraction of opposite  
Sex. We've abused the word 'love' so completely  
In our business that it has come to mean much  
less than I intend it to, but I do love her (p296).

### DHARMA IN DIFFERENT FORMS

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 dumbfounded. 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).

From *dharma* comes success, comes happiness. Every  
thing emerges from *dharma*. *Dharma* is the essence of this  
Whatever he did was in fulfillment of his *dharma*.  
Tell him to have no regrets.  
This is what the message is Bhaiah: says Ashwin,

Then he adds:

A life without regrets is a life lived without  
Introspection, without inquiry. That's not a life  
worth living, is it Bhaiah? he asks.(p.300)

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 a dancing actress. For the moment  
I hold it in my hands, I can feel its texture and its  
wetness...the music will continue playing but I  
will be left holding nothing but my own emptiness.  
I don't want to die. I'm too young. I'm not  
prepared for this. and yet the longer I lie here  
stabbed by pain, the less I want to cling in to life (p.304).

Thus, Ashok is successful as a character in the film but not as a man who failed to perform the different roles of *dharma*. The false life which has fetched Ashok a large fan-following, publicities 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 is his *svardharma*. There may be a ruthlessness about this selfish pursuit but the urban man with no 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 then, 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 strength that a film star derives from his public pose. Should he not be true to it, to the exclusion of all other *dharma*?

## CONCLUSION

The most important theme concerned in *Show Business* is *Dharma*. 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 *Svadharm* is better stressed through different characters related closely to the central character Ashok Banjara where as in *The Great 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 outside-any proof can satisfy his strange discontent.

Thus, 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.

Overall, 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 advent 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.

The novel may be viewed, then, not as an indictment against the *dharma* lapses 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 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 film 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 prefer their own personal interests above 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.



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