



INTERVIEW

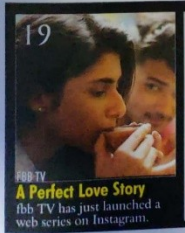
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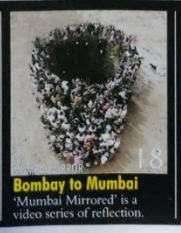
THE STORYTELLER

An interview with a television veteran, who now inhabits a content world.



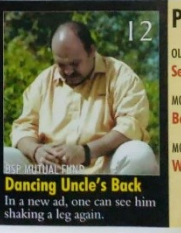
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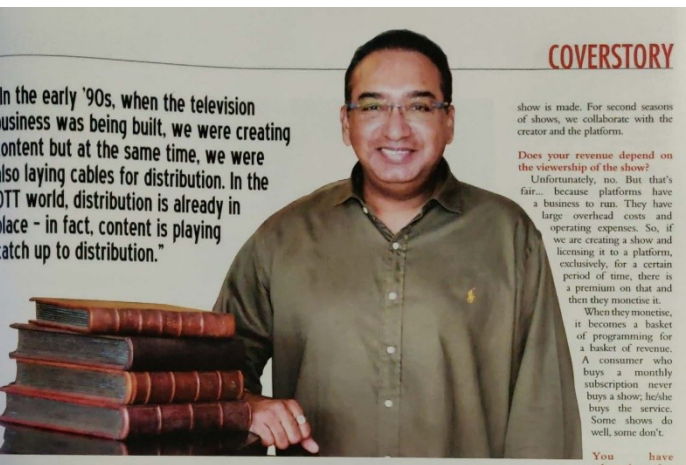
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In a new ad, one can see him shaking a leg again.

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"In the early '90s, when the television business was being built, we were creating content but at the same time, we were also laying cables for distribution. In the OTT world, distribution is already in place - in fact, content is playing catch up to distribution."

channel that never really found its stride. Of late, Nair has pivoted towards making movies, documentaries and short-form fiction.

Edited excerpts:

When you joined Star TV, private television was in its early stages, just like digital is today - do you see similarities?

Yes, now there is a whole range of OTT platforms coming up, just like how satellite television was in the early 1990s and 2000s. There is a lot of interest in the market, lot of new players are getting in, there's competition, the market is growing, the audience is growing, there are many ideas... in entertainment, business models succeed and fail primarily based on audience appreciation.

In the early '90s, when the television business was being built, we were creating content, but at the same time, we were also laying cables for distribution. In the OTT world, distribution is already in place - of a billion boxes, 400 million have got access to high speed internet, screens already exist. In fact, content is playing catch up to distribution.

YouTube has 300 million monthly active users, so the audience is already there. In the television business, there was no audience back then.

What about the big differences? Unlike TV, digital platforms don't share ratings - how do you know how your shows have fared?

There are three ways: social chatter, the feedback we get from platforms, and the real litmus test - the opportunity to make a second season.

What drove you to the content business - art or commerce?

I've always been a storyteller, be it in advertising, television or in the studio business. There's the creative part of it and then there is commerce. It is not art for art's sake or art for commerce's sake; it's actually art for applause, appreciation and acclaim. Eventually, the result is some sort of commercial benefit for all stakeholders. There are producers investing in the shows, so it is important to not lose money. It is called showbiz or show business, after all.

Also, I am drawn to entrepreneurial ideas, building teams from scratch, and then creating the business brick by brick. I like doing it.

Has our industry warmed up to the concept of studios supplying content to platforms?

The model is new for the market. It's exciting. It's like a hybrid movie model. Historically, studios have been making films that have been financed in different ways - pre-sell, studio finance, raising money to make films and then selling different rights. It's a globally established model that we've brought to the drama series business. In a sense, we look at drama series as cinematic television.

We, at Applause, have produced 15 shows so far, of which 10 have been

show is made. For second seasons of shows, we collaborate with the creator and the platform.

Does your revenue depend on the viewership of the show?

Unfortunately, no. But that's fair, because platforms have a business to run. They have large overhead costs and operating expenses. So, if we are creating a show and licensing it to a platform, exclusively, for a certain period of time, there is a premium on that and then they monetise it.

When they monetise, it becomes a basket of programming for a basket of revenue.

A consumer who buys a monthly subscription never buys a show, he/she buys the service. Some shows do well, some don't.

You have adapted a few international hits like 'Hostages', 'The Office' - was it just a 'launch strategy'? What about originals?

Many big TV shows are adaptations - 'KBC' is an adaptation, 'Big Boss' is a remake. The Americans do it all the time; the famous 'Honeymoon' is an adaptation of a British show. 'The Office' is an adaptation of a British show. I don't think there is any other country where they get caught up in this who 'Oh but why can't you do originals' thing. I think it's a very facile argument. Adapting something is extremely difficult... if you do it badly, or if you do not make your own, not to resonate with your audience, it is not going to succeed.

Also, it is better to legitimately adapt than rip off, which so much of my community does all the time in any case. The American 'Office' is my favourite show and we are very proud that we could make the Indian version. When we made KBC (Star, 2000), we never messed around with it. I started the show 19-20 years ago and just a couple of days back, I saw a lady with a crore. It is still the same show.

This does not mean adaptations are an easier sell. Finally, you still have to tell a great story, you still have to cast it, and then adapt it so the whole process has to be repeated.

Right. Speaking of 'The Office', did you discuss it with Hoststar before you commissioned the BIC to make the Indian version?

No, we did not discuss 'The



SAMEER NAIR

The Storyteller

An interview with a television veteran, who now inhabits a content world. By Anirban Roy Choudhury

In 2005, Aditya Birla Group's film studio Applause Entertainment co-produced Anubhav Bachchan and Rani Mukherjee starrer 'Black', a Hindi feature film. While it did well, the India decided to move away from the production business. In 2017, the group hired Sameer Nair and revived the studio. Since then, Applause Entertainment has played its part in growing the Indian digital video ecosystem.

Nair, CEO, Applause Entertainment, joined the studio with the ambition of creating premium dramas for Netflix, Amazon Prime, Hotstar and the like. So far, as many as four shows are streaming Hotstar, one Amazon Prime Video (Mind The Malhotras), 'Hello Minu' on MX Player and Tamil show 'In Dharmam' on Sony LIV. Within a span of two years, the studio has already managed to market around 10 shows which are at various stages of post-production, and has several more in the pipeline.

This business of making shows, for the small screen, and then selling them to video-on-demand (VOD) platforms is relatively new in India. Historically, television broadcasters like Star, Zee, Sony, commissioned shows to production houses like Balaji Teleglobe, Suselek, etc. - the risk was undertaken by the broadcaster and, in return, the broadcaster owned the intellectual property forever. That's how the ecosystem was designed. However, studios like Applause create shows themselves - and with it, comes the risk and the reward.

Before joining Applause, Nair was group CEO at Balaji Teleglobe. It was during his tenure that the group launched its VOD platform ALLBdigi.

Nair started his broadcast journey with Star India in 1994 as its first programming head and is credited with shaping Indian television. At Star India, where he went on to become the CEO, he was closely involved with fortune-telling shows like 'Karam Banga Creepers' and the 'K' series - 'Kahani Ghar Ghar Ki', 'Kyunski Saans Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi', 'Kasanti Zindagi Kay'.

In 2006, he joined Prannay Roy's NDTV to lead the then new general entertainment business; he was the CEO of NDTV Imagine, a

COVERSTORY

Office' with Hotstar before it was made. It was a show that had to be made and we did it. And we can do in the future too.

There is a huge, hungry audience of about 500 million, as per our last count, and it is growing. Obviously television has fatigued... it is not dying, but is slowing down. This whole idea about binge viewing, new stories and new genres is catching up. It is a lot more individualistic, on-demand viewing. We will see all sorts of stories being thrown at this audience, both adaptations and originals.

What are your plans for regional content - do you see takers for premium dramas here?

We have done three Tamil shows, we are doing one Gujarati and one Kannada-Dakhinshi (Indo-Aryan language spoken in South India) show. If you are trying to build a big, robust subscription or advertising-supported market, you need to expand. That is how TV expanded and just one Sun TV... now, everyone has expanded everywhere.

Our immediate expansion plans include expanding the scope of what we define as storytelling. Currently, we have been completely focused on drama series, but we are also looking planning to work on a whole range of middle to high budget movies - that's our focus point.

We are working on a few international collaborations, which means, we are working with international players to co-create series and movies for either the Indian market or international markets. We are getting into short-form fiction as well, which is about stories and not two people dancing - that is TikTok. I believe short-form (under 20 minutes) fiction is going to be big in India.



"In this content business, everything is competition. The biggest competition for OTT platforms is something like TikTok. It's about fighting for peoples' time; the more time they spend on social media, the less time they have to consume a series."

competition for OTT platforms is something like TikTok. It's about fighting for peoples' time; the more time they spend on social media, the less time they have to consume a series. But competition is welcome; it raises the bar, makes you feel alive. While we keep talking about digital being young and nascent, the fact is that a lot of the players in the business are old and established, say, broadcasters, international players, or even e-commerce, technology companies and telcos. So, while it's a growing market, it's also a mature one. Everyone is trying to figure out how best to monetise. I don't think money is a problem as a lot of the players involved in this are deep-pocketed. India is a large market and we could reach 500 million pay-TV customers.

The market is large enough to accommodate everyone. It's about economics. It is not about 'Can there be so many platforms as can? Can so many platforms co-exist?'

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