

● **INTERVIEW: SAMEER NAIR,**
CEO, Applause Entertainment

‘Discovery happens through content, not marketing’



EXPRESS PHOTO: PRADIP DAS

Aditya Birla Group chairman Kumar Mangalam Birla's content studio Applause Entertainment roped in Sameer Nair as CEO last August to create content for digital platforms like Netflix and Amazon. Nair, in conversation with Anirban Roy Choudhury, claims that the company will offer what TV 'never did'. Edited excerpts:

You have been vocal about filling the need gap in content. Can you elaborate on what led to its creation?

In the year 2000, we did *KBC* on Star Plus and along with that we had daily soaps *Kyunki...* and *Kahaani...*, and the whole slew of K-shows. The daily soap opera became a dominant genre on television, to the extent that it wiped out everything else. Weekly was killed completely and everything else went down the daily route. While doing that, India missed out on the opportunity of creating high-quality premium drama shows like in the West which air on a weekly basis; in that sense, we never had our HBO and *Showtime* moment; we never made *Sopranos*, *House of Cards*, *The Wire*, etc. So premium dramas is the gap that we plan to fill.

Are you targeting the youth?

They are not the youth; they are called the first 100 million. They are the first ones who got cable TV (in the '90s), followed by DTH, mobile phones, internet; they were the first on social media as well. They are between the ages of 18-45, live in urban centres, are online shoppers who log on to Facebook, YouTube, etc.

You believe India has a digital content distribution ecosystem in place. What makes you confident about it?

There are three-four moving parts here.

One is the giant connectivity that comes with telecom platforms. Between Idea, Vodafone, Airtel and Jio, we have 900 million connected customers of which 200-300 million are on 4G, which will soon grow to 500 million. They are not telecom platforms for me; these are video streaming platforms — they already have billing mechanisms in place as well as the technology, with consumers in front of a screen.

The question is what is being seen on the screen. We have broadcasters who, unlike the ones in the West, saw digital opportunities early and built their own OTT platforms.

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Then there are independent players — both international and Indian — like Amazon, Netflix and ALTBalaji. Furthermore, there are other players coming in like Paytm which has video ambitions, or take Times Network which bought MX player. Instagram has started long-form content; Apple is commissioning shows. Five years back, we did not have the ecosystem but now, we definitely have it in place.

You intend to form a binge viewing habit in India...

Binging offers the kind of freedom TV never did; instead the latter promoted appointment viewing. What is happening now is that people watch two-three

episodes at home and one or two on the go, so they are essentially binging. When someone likes a show, it is like a meal and they want to finish it.

How does Applause create its products? Does it have TV ambitions too?

We are a studio and are not looking for a platform to 'green light' us. We invest in content creation and do all the hard work including writing, which is the toughest. Then we talk to platforms with a finished product — exactly how the movie business works. TV will be our second run; the primary one is digital platforms. The second syndication could be on TV but that would be later.

Do we have enough talent to reach the level of premium content from the West?

The challenge is, typical television writers have spent 20 years — a generation — writing daily soap operas which is very different from the drama series we are talking about. Film people typically write a two-hour format with one break. It is a start-middle-end template; they don't know how to write for a series either. We are in the process of creating this business and luckily, there are a lot of international examples. India has a deep talent pool, with good technicians; our problem has been the writing.

When you put a show on Netflix or Amazon Prime Video, it becomes one of many in the vast catalogue. How big a challenge is discovery?

What happens is that the platform promotes the show; you then have word of mouth. Most of this business is not about marketing as much as it is about word of mouth, because the show is never getting old. So, I think discovery happens on the back of content and not marketing.