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## Inform, Educate and Entertain; Don't Sensationalise: DD Director

- Rahul and Nitesh



The FDR team meets Mr. Vijay Bhagawan, the Director of Doordarshan Kendra, Hyderabad

**Could you briefly tell us about Doordarshan (DD)?**

DD was started in 1959. In Hyderabad, it began in 1972, as a SITE (Satellite Instructional Television Experiment) project, where programmes were made in

regional languages on topics like rural development, nutrition, agriculture and education. These were telecasted from Delhi. By 1977 it became a full-fledged DD Kendra in Hyderabad.

DD is one of the biggest broadcasting networks in the Asia-Pacific region. Besides China, we are one of the biggest broadcasters. We have 6 national channels namely DD National, DD News, DD Bharati, DD Sports, DD Urdu and DD Kisan. Apart from these, we have different regional channels in all languages as a part of Regional Language Satellite Channel (RLSC).

Since 1997, DD and AIR are not directly under Government of India but under a separate corporation - "Prasar Bharati".

### **What is DD's role today?**

The mandate of DD is basically public service broadcasting, where the main motto is education and infotainment.

Today, apart from entertainment, issues like rural development, women empowerment, education, child welfare, agriculture, animal husbandry are shown on DD. Also, as a public broadcaster, it is our primary duty to preserve, protect and promote the culture and

traditions of India like classical dances, music and folk art forms. This is in contrast to popular private channels, which tend to focus more on entertainment and sensationalism and have little place for the kind of programs mentioned above.

Since DD is a public broadcaster, we do not indulge in speculation or sensationalism. We try to present news and events objectively.

### **How does DD deal with competition from private broadcasting networks?**

Generally, we don't think we have competition with any other channel. Because we are not competitors to them and they are not competitors to us given the different mandates.

### **As an organization how do you balance profit-making and social obligations?**

As mentioned earlier, we are a public broadcasting agency. But as a corporation, we also face a dilemma because we have to earn revenue while meeting societal

obligations. To generate more revenue, we have to create programmes according to the market but we are bound by certain rules and regulations. Yet, we still make some good programmes by balancing our social objective. For example, we telecast a programme on career guidance and it is one of the top-rated programmes on our channel. On the contrary, private channels can relay any content. Also, in the case of news, we do not conduct sensationalist debates like other private channels. So, in such a scenario, the scope for revenue yielding content is low. Whatever we do, we must do it within the guidelines provided. So these kind of limitations are always there for DD.

### **How does DD earn revenue?**

As far as DD is concerned, the main source of income is commercial advertisements. Apart from commercial advertisements, DD also has Developmental Communication Division (DCD) which looks after the promotion of

various ministerial initiatives. So DCD prepares programmes for different ministries and they reimburse DD.

### **Does DD get greater revenue during Olympics or Cricket World cup matches? What is your current position on sports and their telecast rights?**

Yes, we do get revenue during events like these. But for the broadcasting rights of these matches, there is a bidding process and DD also has to undergo the bidding process along with other commercial players which makes it difficult for DD to grab the broadcasting rights keeping in mind the revenue constraints. But in regard to the Supreme Court Judgement given, any cricket match related to India must be telecasted in DD. So we telecast the match and share the revenue with the other company which acquired the rights through the bidding process. Even though we are given the mandatory rights to telecast, we don't get much revenue for all sports except cricket where the

viewership is very high and also because revenue has to be shared.

### **Why can't DD generate more ad revenues by itself?**

We are not a monopoly now. Unlike earlier, content today is even shared by other private channels who get the lion's share of the ads in the market today. But the Union government supports DD, as it is the public broadcaster, by giving ads of various ministries. But still, there is a gap. For example, if the Union government makes it mandatory for PSUs like ONGC etc. to allocate 25 % of their ads with DD, the channel may be protected. Further, we are undertaking several stringent cost-cutting measures to improve our efficiency. In the age of satellite communication, things like terrestrial communication are getting redundant. In this regard, we are winding up outdated things in accordance to the market. Finally, we have to invest more money in quality programmes to get more ad revenue. At the same time, social welfare programmes

reflecting our responsibility as true public service broadcaster are also to be promoted. We just have to introspect further and see where we can do better. This is part of the system and a continuous process.

### **What is your take on the question of autonomy?**

There are two types of autonomy - one is financial and another is functional. With the restructuring of DD and AIR under Prasar Bharati, Doordarshan has to rely on another agency for finances. When the channel was directly under the Union government, fund devolution was relatively better. With regard to functional autonomy, there are obligations and rules that leave little space to innovate or generate new revenue sources. For example, let us consider horse racing. If I show it on my channel I may make some money but I might not be permitted to broadcast it because of our guidelines. To give you another example, I cannot telecast a dubbed film in our channel and we telecast films having only U and

U/A CBFC certificate. Apart from this, the programmes shown on DD undergo another layer of censorship (by our internal committee), keeping in mind the guidelines. All these issues are stopping DD to reach its full potential.

**What is the status of recruitments? When was the last recruitment done to this Kendra?**

Generally, recruitments are done either through UPSC or staff selection commission. Previously Kendra used to recruit depending upon the required grade of a post, but that policy is now obsolete. Now every recruitment is through Staff Selection Commission. And after 2014 there were no fresh recruitments done to this Kendra even though we have a lot of vacancies in the programme division.

**Is the above-mentioned recruitment policy uniform for all the posts?**

News staff is recruited on a contractual basis, administrative

staff through SSC and officers of the programme division are recruited through UPSC and SSC. Along with that some local recruitment is done for jobs like makeup artists, carpenters and set assistants as per the need.

Previously we used to have regular staff for these local jobs but now they are being outsourced. We even used to recruit employees on a contractual basis but based on the Supreme Court judgment, they get regularized if they work for 120 days in a year. So now, we are mainly outsourcing the jobs. But even for outsourcing, restrictions like having to give a maximum of seven assignments at a time for an employee in programme division, do exist. Additionally, we have an artist fee structure where the payment is done according to the grade of the artist. And in the field of music, AIR gives grades the artists on the basis of which we pay the artists for their services. But for dancers, DD conducts independent auditions and grades them on the basis of which they are paid.

**Did you see any increase in productivity after recruiting people through contractual basis?**

We need more creative, fresh talent who are updated with the latest market standards. And they bring in fresh ideas to the organization.

In DD, regular staff's average age is 50 years. So it is important to hire new talent to improve the content quality.

**Why are producers not approaching and investing content with DD?**

Once upon a time, we had a lot of demand but now due to so many channels in the market and the size of the pie being the same with more channels, competition is more and returns are less for the producers. The producers approaching us are not investing in quality content, which in turn yields less viewership. Hence due to less viewership producers producing quality content do not approach us. This is a vicious cycle. Keeping the interest of viewers in

mind, we have to mould ourselves, in a way that is beneficial for the channel. If we have to make good programmes, initially we have to invest in acclaimed artists, which is often difficult as per market standards. We also have to invest in creative personnel rather than more technical decision makers.

**We still see only old movies being telecasted in DD. Why is it that we don't see the latest ones?**

Firstly, there is a set of audience for the old movies we telecast in DD. And secondly, for telecasting the latest movies, we have to purchase the rights of the film, but right now the price for television rights of popular films for national telecast range from Rs. 3 crores - Rs. 15 crores which DD is unable to meet. Once upon a time, it was not a big problem but now due to the high prices of the television rights of a film, DD is unable to purchase them and also exploit them to generate more revenue. Generally, DD as a channel does not purchase any feature film rights. We telecast

the film from the others who already possess the rights for such a film. Accordingly, we have a rate card for the films based on how old it is, which language the film is in, and so on. So, if it is a latest film we can pay around Rs. 20 lakhs for one telecast. Between Rs. 1 lakh-Rs. 20 lakhs we have different rates at national and regional levels based on this criteria. So, here the private channels have an edge and they buy it for higher prices and also market it equally to earn their revenue because it is necessary for the sustenance of their channel.

### **What is the role of DD in elections?**

We have seen many reforms being undertaken in the electoral system and issues like public funding of elections too are in the limelight.

Certain issues like Free Election Speech are being pursued by DD too, where depending upon their vote share in previous elections, we have allotted more than 10 hours totally to various political parties for their campaigning. The Election Commission negotiates and decides upon the time to be given to each political party. Then, draw slots are taken and in these designated time slots, political parties are given air time free of cost till their nominations close. This is a very recent policy. Until recently, DD wasn't even allowed to monetize on election advertisements, but some rules were amended recently to facilitate revenue generation. And it is still an ongoing process. ▪