

## A SIX POINT AGENDA FOR TV SERIALS

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**INTRODUCTION** This paper is a sequel to my earlier piece titled AN UNEASY LOOK AT TV SERIALS that appeared in the October 2017 issue of the alumni magazine, in which I had highlighted six major problems that seemed to chip away from the potential glory of TV serials. I now present a 6-point agenda that might be of interest to all stakeholders of the television industry.

**LENGTH OF THE SERIAL** Change over to the idea of one year serials, with no more than 300 episodes per serial. Say goodbye to 1000 episode serials, lasting three years or longer. It is simply too long and is bound to lose viewer interest. Particularly important, in all creative work, is the idea of closure - closing the show at the right time, with all loose ends tied up. An interesting quote from Henry Longfellow, the well-known American writer, comes to mind: 'Great is the art of beginning, but greater is the art of ending.'

That 300-episode serials might disrupt the revenues of TV serials, which essentially come from advertising, is a valid objection (Reference: India Study Channel, Experts, How Any Television Serial Earns, 1 July 2012). On the other hand, it is more than likely that both TV channels and serial producers might wish to augment their revenue streams in the form of new stories and new serials, rather than run the same serial for five years or longer.

**A GOOD STORY IS ABSOLUTELY CRITICAL** Go for really good stories, not a collection of disjointed episodes. The experience of Hollywood (Sound of Music, Dark Knight, Godfather, Gone with the Wind, Casablanca), and Bollywood (Sholay, Lagaan, Three Idiots, Anand, Mughal-E-Azam) shows that a good story is the most critical ingredient in the success of a film, followed closely by the induction of bankable stars and high quality direction. It is entirely possible that, in future, gifted actors might wish to look at the story first, before committing themselves to a serial.

**ON WRITING A GOOD STORY** Here are two interesting perspectives from Ayn Rand:

1. "I write, and read, for the sake of the story. My basic test for any story is: Would I want to meet these characters and observe these events in real life? Is this story an experience worth living through for its own sake? Is the pleasure of contemplating these characters an end in itself?"
2. "You don't build for the way people live, but for the way they should live. I don't write for people as they are, but as they could be, and should be "(Ayn Rand, author of Atlas Shrugged)

The big problem with most TV serials is that they do not get on with the story. They rely too much on creating and maintaining suspense, and, in the process, miss out on the real artistic element, namely highlighting the triumph of good over evil.

**FEMALE CHARACTERS IN THE SERIALS** As far as possible, avoid portraying women in vicious and villainous roles. If needed, have one or two such characters, who do not conform to traditional female attributes of love and compassion, but show those roles in a manner that there is an early closure - either they are outwitted by the good people in the serials, or are caught and punished by the law of the land. There is nothing to be gained by prolonging such

roles, except polluting the minds of the audience, particularly those of young girls growing into adulthood.

**VILLAINS AND THE GOOD PEOPLE IN THE SERIAL** That villains are always one step ahead of their victims, and they are generally well prepared, in terms of hatching their evil plans, and putting them into action, is an observed reality. But, while the victims - the good people in the series - are admittedly one step behind the villains, there is no need to portray them as slow, sloppy and helpless victims of the villains. Instead, show them as people who can bounce back and checkmate the villains.

A serious problem with TV serials is the tendency to show the villains, particularly female characters in villainous roles, as outwitting the good people in the serials for long periods of time - sometimes two or three years over the life of the serial. There is no artistic justification for this tendency - its sole motive seems to be to keep the show on, somehow or the other. How does one breathe some art into this situation? The next paragraph presents a suggestion.

There is a deep rooted instinct in human nature - through the ages and across the world - that would like to see the victory of good over evil. And, tapping into that instinct could be a big step forward to both commercial and creative success for TV serials. A more detailed suggestion follows.

**WHY NOT CREATE A STRONG, NEW CHARACTER?** Create a character in these serials, like Jack Reacher in Lee Child's novels, with the detective powers of a Sherlock Holmes, and also the physical and mental strength to handle a fight or two with the villains. In Lee Child's novels, Jack Reacher is a retired member of the Military Police, with uncanny powers of investigation, and a knack of appearing on the crucial scene at just the right time, when the good guys in the novel are in the clutches of the villains. He rescues the good guys, hands over the bad guys to the Police, and then, can you believe it, he rides quietly into the sunset. No forwarding address, no emotional farewells, and no one knows where he lives. Absolutely remarkable character.

I venture to suggest that the creation of such a character could add to the artistic, and commercial, success of serials. That such a character can eventually be branded, with the prospect of significant advertising revenues, is an opportunity for TV channels to pursue.

**PORTRAYING EMOTIONS** The tendency to build up emotions to almost boiling point may harm not just the elderly and the vulnerable sections of the audience, but may even scare viewers who might otherwise have stayed on with the serials. While there is a need to capture the many diverse points of view in a serial, it does seem possible, through appropriate direction and dialogue, to minimise fiery arguments on the screen. Avoiding excessive dependence on suspense and nail-biting finish should help.

**CONCLUSION** Given my limited exposure to the television industry, I present the above agenda, not as holy grail, but as a basis for discussion among key stakeholders of the industry. Its purpose will have been achieved if it stimulates some fresh thinking on the subject, leading possibly to some new approaches to TV serials.

I have continued to watch the Tamil serials that gave me the ammunition for my article of October 2017, particularly, the problems highlighted in this paper. I have been examining, silently in my own mind, whether in the past two years or more, TV serials have undergone

any major change. I wish I could say YES but my answer is a reluctant NO. Serials have changed little in their approach. Particularly disappointing is their continued neglect of the most critical ingredient in the success of a serial, namely a good story - particularly of a kind that highlights the triumph of good over evil.

However, with so many creative minds at work in the world of television, I venture to hope that we will soon witness some big changes in TV serials as an art form.