

Satyamev Jayate: a quiet Indian revolution

On 15 August 2012, a special Independence Day episode of the reality show *Satyamev Jayate* (Truth Alone Prevails) was aired on Indian television. It was a rare event in the nation's media history, as it showcased the immediate social impact that the show had had in India: a fast track court set up in Haryana to address long-pending cases regarding female foeticide in the state; generic medicine stores in Maharashtra; street-plays performed to increase awareness about toxic food; a long overdue bill passed in Parliament to protect children from sexual abuse ... the list was a long one.

Rituparna Roy

SEASON 1 of *Satyamev Jayate* ran from 6 May–29 July 2012. The show was heavily promoted and garnered widespread attention even before it began, courtesy of the show's host, Aamir Khan, one of India's greatest living actors and beloved by the nation. Khan was always a popular actor, dishing out Bollywood hits since 1988, yet he started to redefine his career – and the Hindi film industry – in 2001 by producing and (later) directing offbeat, socially relevant films (*Lagaan*, 2001; *Taare Zameen Par*, 2007; *Peepli Live*, 2010; *Dhobi Ghat*, 2011). His audience has now come to identify his work not only with quality and substance, but also newness. They are invariably (to use a Bollywood term) *hatke* [different].

Awakening India

That difference was adroitly carried over by Khan from his celluloid creations to his maiden TV venture in 2012: *Satyamev Jayate* [henceforth SMJ]. Interestingly, the timeslot Khan chose for SMJ was Sunday morning at 11am, in a bid reminiscent of the telecasting of the epic serials *Ramayan* and *Mahabharat* a generation ago, when the whole country came together to watch the stories grandmothers of yore habitually told their grandchildren. Bringing India together was only one part of Aamir Khan's agenda. In one of the promotion films for SMJ, Khan said: "Remember – Sunday, 11am – I am coming India, to awaken you." He lived up to his promise. In a series of hard-hitting episodes over the course of the next three months, he did awaken India to issues that have been its bane for decades, but have never received the attention they deserve – female foeticide; child sexual abuse; dowry; medical malpractices; persons with disabilities; domestic violence; alcohol abuse; untouchability; old age; inequality.

With SMJ, Aamir Khan had taken media activism to new heights. Never before had the powerful medium of television been used to this effect in India. It may be noted here that until the introduction of Satellite TV in the early 1990s, the only channel that Indians were exposed to was the state-owned, rather staid, Doordarshan (or DD). Things changed dramatically with the opening up of the skies; and with the rapid proliferation of 24/7 channels thereafter, India went the way of most other countries in this respect, offering infotainment through standard categories – soaps, news-based programs, film-based programs, sports (read cricket), dance and music competitions. And Reality Shows.

But few shows have been able to capture the collective imagination of Indians like SMJ. I am reminded of particular predecessors – each for a different aspect of the show. In terms of sheer newness and immediate audience impact, I am reminded of *The World This Week* – Pronny Roy's pioneering news show way back in the late 1980s, which was the hottest new topic for India's young then. And something of the excitement that I felt as an impressionable schoolgirl anticipating the next episode of *The World This Week* I rediscovered more than two decades later for SMJ. But perhaps the most immediate predecessor of SMJ and one with which it could be fruitfully compared (though their program-categories are different) is NDTV's *We The People*, anchored by Barkha Dutt, India's most popular TV personality. For the last ten years, Dutt's program has been successfully debating contentious current issues facing the nation. But while *We The People* has consistently raised topical issues and highlighted India's problems, *Satyamev Jayate* has gone a step further and has tried to find their solutions.

Storyteller

Its social commitment is the single most important factor that distinguishes SMJ from everything that has gone before it, and was eloquently expressed in Aamir Khan's 'Apologia' in the inaugural episode:

I work in films – enact different roles, live different lives. But in the midst of all this, I also have a life of my own – not as an actor, but as a human being. I read newspapers, watch television, meet friends and different kinds of people – a lot of things affect me and touch my mind. On the one hand, India is advancing at a fast pace, reaching new heights. I feel very happy about it. Feel very proud to be an Indian. But on the other hand, there are some bitter truths that we don't want to face. When I think of them, I get perplexed, depressed. There are times I think – 'Why should



I bother about issues that don't affect me directly? My life is getting along fine. What difference would it make? But it does. After all, I too am a part of this society. Whatever affects it, affects me and all others. Had Gandhi, Tilak, Bose, Nehru, Maulana Azad been alive today – what answer would we have given them? Does the India of today live up to their dreams? So, I'm coming amidst you – to listen, to understand, and also to share. I want to go to the bottom of every issue; want to bring out the truth; want to talk about those issues that touch the lives of all Indians. I don't want to blame or judge anyone. After all, the responsibility of our problems lies with one of us – or maybe, all of us. So, join me in a journey – to seek, to find, to listen, to tell, to solve some grave puzzles.

The 'journey' was indeed memorable throughout – with both the host and millions of audience members being enriched in the process. Of course, it was not all smooth sailing. Khan had enraged many, most notably doctors who felt he had unfavourably portrayed their profession in the episode on medical malpractices in India. There were others who were not impressed with the show's popularity and thought that it led people to mistakenly believe that there are simplistic solutions to India's complex problems. Khan was also accused of faking emotions during the show. I can understand why. Khan is prone to crying while listening to the traumatic stories of his guests – and Indian men are not supposed to cry, hosts of reality shows (and a film star!) even less so. But there is nothing fake about the emotions that Khan's show evoked in his audience – though in the September 2012 TIME magazine feature on him, Khan admitted to manipulation through a dramatic presentation of the stories: 'I'm not a journalist, I'm a storyteller ... I can make you angry, sad, happy ... That's my skill set.'

Agents of change

True. Though a reality show, with lots of relevant facts and figures, it was the personal stories that stood out in SMJ: Snehalata, who discovered a new life after 16 years of being subjected to domestic violence; Harish Iyer, who found an escape in Sridevi's films during his 12-year-long sexual abuse by his maternal uncle; Kishwar Jahan, who continued to have faith in the power of love, even after her son Rizwan Rahman became a victim of an honour-killing for marrying the woman he loved; and Parveen Khan, whose face was bitten off by her husband because she could not produce a son. The stories of victims aside, there were innumerable memorable moments in the show, where people who fought for others and tried to usher in some change in society shared their thoughts and experiences. One is reminded of Bezwada Wilson, inspired to make the eradication of manual scavenging his life's mission; or Samit Sharma, lamenting the death of his maidservant's little son due to a lack of generic medicine; or Sunitha Krishnan, asking why is it that trafficked women find a place in films and literature, but not in society.

Listening to these agents of change, it was not difficult to understand why Aamir Khan had gone on record saying: "Doing the show, my faith in my country and countrymen has only increased". He actually transmitted that faith to others; through his show, Indians came to know of institutions they were not even aware existed – institutions like Snehalaya, Unique Home for Girls, Humanity Trust, Himmat Mahila Samooch, Love Commandoes, Azad Foundation, Sarvodaya Trust, Prajwala. Some of them are big and operate at national or state levels, but most are small initiatives by brave people wishing to eradicate injustices and redress problems.

A quiet revolution

Spurred by its success, SMJ came back with a second season in March 2014. Although fewer episodes than the first season, it once again successfully placed its finger on the pulse of the nation. It started with an issue that had shaken India in the intervening period between seasons – the increasing incidence of rape and brutalization of women, with the gruesome case of Nirbhaya in December 2012 as the starting point; and ended with two episodes on India's polity in the warm up to the country's 14th General Elections – urging Indians to be more responsible citizens in one, and presenting a stark picture of the extent of the criminalization of politics in India in the other. The remaining two episodes dealt with the Police in India and ways of garbage disposal.

Like the previous season, the impact of the show lasted beyond the airing of the episodes, with the program organizers' own intervention in the issues discussed testifying to their social commitment. For example, one of the main demands of SMJ's *Fighting Rape* episode, aired on 2 March 2014, was the setting up of One-Stop Crisis Centres (OSCCs) for survivors of sexual assault (which was already a key recommendation of the Justice Usha Mehra Commission). This was further strengthened by a series of events launched by ActionAid India, SMJ's partner NGO, including an audience with the President of India on March 7. Soon after this, on March 11, Aamir Khan and Uday Shankar, the CEO of Star India, wrote an open letter to the Chief Justice of India, asking him to intervene on some issues that affect survivors of rape in India and delay the process of giving them justice.

Many more examples can be given; the point being SMJ's pioneering media activism. In the very first episode of SMJ, in 2012, Aamir Khan had declared: "it is our desire to be part of a change in India." Well, that change did happen – and in a way and to an extent that is nothing short of a quiet revolution.

Rituparna Roy is an IAS Alumni and the author of two books: *'South Asian Partition Fiction in English: From Khushwant Singh to Amitav Ghosh'* (AUP, 2010) & (the co-edited volume) *'Writing India Anew: Indian English Fiction, 2000-2010'* (AUP, 2013). She currently works as a Freelance Editor and writes a blog on Indian Cinema – rituparnasandilya.wordpress.com