

[India's Bold New Religious TV](#)

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TELEVISION

India's Bold New Religious TV

Less than 15 years ago, great movie makers like B. R. Chopra molded religion into blockbuster mega-drama and took the limelight of Indian TV by storm. It was a hard act to follow, but a new generation of independent producers are at it again.

RAJIV MALIK, NEW DELHI, INDIA

Unita Bagga is a 52-year-old New Delhi housewife who starts her day at five in the morning watching TV. Not what you might expect from a deeply religious person who, only a few years ago, might have strongly denounced television as a worldly distraction. Sunita didn't change. Indian TV did. It got religious. The TV Sunita watches in that early morning time is Sanskar, one of India's two new, full-time religious channels.

This noteworthy transformation of Indian television, which has manifested most significantly within the past two years, began late in the 1980s. Back then there were only two TV channels, and both were produced, owned and controlled by Doordarshan, the government television network. In 1987, Doordarshan broke away from secular business-as-usual and commissioned famed movie maker Ramanand Sagar to produce a television version of the famous Indian literary epic Ramayana. Sagar created a 70-episode series that was so

hugely successful the network followed a year later with another Indian magnum opus, the Mahabharata. This Mahabharata, produced in 94 episodes by B. R. Chopra (see sidebar), was technically superior to the Ramayana and even more popular. Far beyond even high expectations, this masterpiece completely mesmerized all of India during its showing in 1988 and 1989. The Ramayana, Mahabharata and their producers were showered with innumerable awards. A new age in Indian television was born. Yet, no one could have anticipated how this era would develop in the years that followed.

When Hinduism Today asked me to take a peep into this world of religious TV, I thought it would be interesting. It turned out to be an adventure. First, I had to learn a little history.

Doordarshan made a bold move in televising the Ramayana and Mahabharata, and knowledgeable sources credit then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi for making it happen. With the dawn of the 1990s, the staggering popularity of these two lone epics had stimulated uncomfortable growing pains for Doordarshan. Higher standards had been set in technical production, and mind-boggling levels of viewership had to be matched. Through the years, Doordarshan tried and failed to repeat the miracle of those awesome late 80s. Slowly the media giant was forced to gravitate back toward its more reliable secular repertoire. Yet a taste for religious television in India had been acquired. If Doordarshan could not serve up more, somebody would.

As I sat comfortably in my New Delhi office planning the

pursuit of this story, it looked like it was going to be fun and easy. Almost immediately, however, I was challenged with some obstacles. It took me nearly two months just to set up interview appointments by phone with all of the necessary TV broadcasting elite in Mumbai. The two main religious channel owners were naturally suspicious of my requests for an in-depth account of how they operated internally. They were only further intimidated when I said I planned to fly down and pay them a visit. I found out later that they thought Hinduism Today might be considering the creation of some third, rival channel. I also later learned that each was miffed that the other was being given equal coverage. After much discussion, everyone was finally content to submit to what in the end turned out to be a most enjoyable and beneficial affair for all involved.

Mumbai was drenched with rain during my week of interviews there so much so that even the city's daily life and business were greatly disturbed. Vehicles stood still in the streets, and getting from one place to another was almost impossible. It all had the makings of good television drama.

My first two days were spent in the conservative office/studio complex of Aastha Television. Then I was off to visit the folks at Sanskar, Aastha's competition. Following this, I had the good fortune of speaking with program executives at Zee Entertainment, a non-religious channel which nevertheless has produced

a highly regarded one-hour religious program every day for the past ten years. It was the people at Zee that introduced me to renowned film producer Ravi Chopra, who in turn was gracious enough to arrange some chat time for me with his father, Sri B. R. Chopra, Indian cinema's "grand old man." This latter interview, completely unplanned, turned out to be the high point of my journey.

Aasthav nestled in Worli, an industrial suburb of Mumbai is well equipped with hi-tech studios for recording, dubbing and video taping. When I was there, the whole complex was abuzz with the sights and sounds of Hinduism in action. Videotapes of bhajans and lectures were busily being edited and, before my very eyes, entire programs were being assembled. I even attended the taping of a numerology session being shot live in one of their twelve studios.

The brain behind Aastha is Kirit C. Mehta, Chairman and Managing Director of CMM Broadcasting Network Limited, which owns and operates the Aastha Television Channel. Mehta, who is physically disabled due to polio, is a man with tremendous willpower. Talking with him (see sidebar), I could actually feel his will at work as he vivaciously described his vision of the aastha (faith) of Hinduism coming alive in the minds of his viewers. Mehta, a Jain, originally wanted to produce a channel

featuring Jain programming exclusively. However, because he could not get the necessary financial support from the Jain community, he created Aastha, which is today 90% Hindu in content.

In contrast to Aastha's huge complex, Sanskar's office/studio, near Nariman Point in the heart of Mumbai, is modest, to say the least. I found brothers Dilip and Dinesh Kabra, Sanskar's joint owners, to be practical and humble souls. I had met Dilip, the elder brother, in Allahabad during the Mahakumbha Mela. We were both there as journalists. Dilip even interviewed me at that time for Sanskar, asking me to tell their viewership about our magazine, Hinduism Today. So our rapport was instantaneous.

"I interviewed you in Allahabad," Dilip said as I walked into his office. "And now you are interviewing me. Wonderful are the ways of God in settling the affairs of men."

Dilip immediately organized interviews for me with two popular bhajan singers: Anup Jalota and Vinod Agarwal—both featured on Sanskar. He also arranged for me to attend an evening program of bhajans by Anup Jalota taking place that evening in a popular five-star Mumbai hotel. It was most touching to witness

the deep, heartfelt devotion of a packed audience fully immersed in divine music and thoughts of God right in the middle of a city much more famous for glitz, glamour, late-night parties and discotheques. I left the bhajan performance convinced that regardless of Western influence, Hinduism would never die.

As might be expected, devotional musicians like Jalota love this swelling wave of interest in faith-based television. "These people who have dared to start these channels— I bow before them," says Anup Jalota. "May God bestow upon them wisdom and strength so that they can keep doing this noble work."

Kirit Mehta and Dilip Kabra both maintain that religious channels in general, unlike entertainment channels, develop a deep and enduring relationship with viewers. It is a relationship based upon spiritual commitment. Both channel administrators lament that they suffer greatly from lack of funds and that their financial ambition right now is simply to break even.

Dinesh Kabra, Dilip's younger brother, in charge of marketing and promotion at Sanskar, says the first and largest challenge is always simply making contact with advertisers. "Today there are at least one hundred channels upon which media planners can advertise," says Dinesh. "They must get the best possible value for their money and need to be convinced that advertising with us will fetch them good results. Naturally, they ask about our viewership. Since a rating system has not yet been devised for new entrants like us, we cannot give them solid figures. Obviously, this makes it tough getting accepted."

For Zee TV, the one religious hour they feature does not have to make money. The rest of their entertainment channel does that. Zee program director Prakash Menon says, "The whole Zee TV family is very religious. We are telecasting our religious programming purely as a service to our viewership. We understand the importance of divinity. But being an entertainment channel, we have limitations."

For both Aastha and Sanskar, attracting youth and

understanding their needs is a primary concern. Mehta asserts that any religious education given to the children is better than what they are getting now, which is nothing. And, he stresses, they are interested, contrary to public opinion.

The programming for both channels has been criticized for poor content, lack of focus and low-grade technical presentation. Yet even the worst critics concede that what has transpired thus far is a laudable beginning. Advocates far outnumber faultfinders. Today, right now, any time, you can tune in to the best of India's bhajans and discourses in the comfort and convenience of your own home on your own TV. What is lacking in creative originality and slick presentation is made up for by the "reality effect" of being present at a live event.

Although both Aastha and Sanskar unabashedly draw most of their educational content from a grand wealth of ancient knowledge stemming from the Vedas, the central scripture of Hinduism, they both refrain from openly acknowledging this obvious Hindu source. When I questioned them

about this directly, they explained that today's industry insiders are loath to use the "H" word because they feel it diminishes viewership. If a station calls itself Hindu, they assert, all of India's non-Hindu "isms" will be less inclined to watch.

They also contend that reference to Hinduism will imply to many a more sectarian, "narrow-minded" or "old-fashioned" approach to religion in general. With the Indian economy striving to go global, as it is in today's faster moving international society, the thrust in television broadcasting, as well as in other forms of communication, is to attract the more "open-minded, free-thinking modern man," both from within India's borders and beyond.

For these people, "spiritualism" is a more accessible and magnetic term to use in identifying television content. Further validating this perspective, advertisers—especially international advertisers—are making it abundantly clear that they prefer the secular rather than the Hindu identity. Finally, the television producers rationalize, Hindus watching these religious channels will know that their content is Hindu and

will not have to be told.

The producers of Aastha and Sanskar are swimming boldly upstream, against the tides of easy financial success. No one— not even their competitors— would deny their courage. Though for the future they promise to broaden their presentation by including programs loosely classified in a category often termed "New Age" or "spiritual," they are in their heart of hearts deeply Hindu and are doing this work for no other reason than to express, share and propagate the Hindu dharma. No one has asked them to do what they are doing, and the obstacles they face are formidable. Producing these channels at great cost, no profit and for very little thanks, they step courageously into an uncertain future, fueled only by boundless respect for Indian spiritual traditions and a tireless urge to serve. They are clearing a path for others to follow.

Television and electronic media are taking on a new role in modern times. They are no longer just vehicles for news and entertainment with a little education thrown in to ease public conscience.

Though this change is most evident in channels like Aastha and Sanskar, almost all of India's television channels— even the most secular— now have at least one 60-minute, early-morning time slot dedicated to bhajans, discourses and yoga teaching sessions. It is a quiet revolution of a unique sort, taking place almost imperceptibly in mothers' kitchens and family living rooms. It's India's own version of "reality TV"— religious reality— coming to life.

I feel strongly that the day will come when being openly Hindu will increase and not decrease the viewership of an Indian religious channel. When Hinduism is more fully appreciated for its vast treasure of ancient wisdom, it won't have to be sold. It will sell itself. For this, education is needed. And what better place to educate than on television.

Viewer's Speak Out About Religious TV

"These channels are really a boon for our children. There have been so many attempts to divide Hinduism. No one has succeeded yet. These religious channels are doing their part during these modern times to help pass the Hindu heritage on to the next generation. These two channels, Aastha and Sanskar, are very appropriate. They are like healthy blood in the body. If Aastha and Sanskar are there, our life is bright."

Sri P.R. Dawar

Naturopath

"On Sanskar and Aastha, I watch bhajans for two hours a day. I am a fan of Sri Anup Jalota. I also like the pujas of Mahalakshmi, Ganesh and Sai Baba. I want to learn new bhajans. My mother watches these channels with me in the evenings and encourages me to learn to sing."

Riya Purushottam Kalawant

Ten-year-old student

"Children will do what they see their parents doing. Because my husband and I watch these programs, my daughter has also developed an interest in them. My friends and their families also watch these channels, and we keep on telling others about the sadhus that give the lectures."

Mrs. Soniya Kalawant

Housewife and mother of Riya

"Religious programming is successful in India because people here are interested in religion. More than anywhere else in the world, we are deeply inclined toward a religious way of life. Other religions say one thing is bad and another is good. Our religion says: 'If you do this, this happens; if you do that, that happens.'

Now decide what you want to do.' These new religious channels are rendering a service, but it could be better. Life is becoming busier these days, and we don't have much time to tell our kids what to do. We are losing touch with our spirituality. This is obvious. These programs could most certainly fill that communication gap. But the problem is: they are not interesting. How can you

grab the attention of someone if your presentation is not interesting? This was one of the reasons my father was so successful. He knew how to grab the attention of the masses. If these channels could show good programs and give new information, I would ask my children to watch them. But if they are not interesting, a child will sit for a few minutes and then run away, regardless of

what we say. We as Hindus should first strive to understand Hinduism. It is not only a way of worshiping God. It is a way of living life. The problem with a lot of us today is that we want to look good, rather than really being good. I came into film-making at the age of 23 just after I finished college. I perform havan every Sunday with my father and our family. In our house our Hindu culture is very much

alive. We have tried to maintain that. Our children are very close to us. My father started all of this years ago, and I am continuing it."

Ravi Chopra: Eminent film producer,

son of veteran producer Sri B. R. Chopra

B. R. Chopra Was There When It All Began

The "grand old man of
Cinema" talks about
life, movies, TV and
religion

Mythology is a part of life, particularly in India. Life in India still retains Hinduism and Hindu culture. For many, many years I have been performing havan every Sunday. I feel that time which I spend away from worldly activity is something good. It

gives me some purification and alters my attitude toward life. I am a true Hindu, but I am also a modern man.

Whether or not the youth watch religious TV programs depends

on the attitude of the father and mother. Things are different these days. The atmosphere of Mumbai is different. It is heterogeneous. I know these people. They are religious minded. Being religious and being religious minded are

not the same. I cannot say that I am a very religious man. But I am religious minded. I am very much aware of the importance of religion. The Rig Veda says to be a human being first.

The film industry has its own ways, but it would be wrong to say that people drink because they follow the stars. I have been in this business for the last sixty years, and I do not drink. At my residence nobody drinks. But nobody is vegetarian in our

house either.

Things are changing very quickly now, but religion is never going to die. Even in the West this is true.

My message for the

Hindus of the world is to be a good Hindu. I have one principle in life. I strive to be good and honest. If I go out of station~ even if only for one day~ I go with my wife. I have never seen the face of another woman in all of my life, though I have worked with

many actresses. And there were many who sought to befriend me.

I have asked my son Ravi to adhere to this principle and he does. I want to be a good, honest man, and for this I seek the

blessings of God. The
blessings of God are
very important.

Big Plans for a Big
Future in
"Spiritual" TV

Kirit C. Mehta and
wife Neena
discovered aastha,
"faith," and
created a religious
channel by the
same name to
prove it

Hinduism Today
correspondent
Rajiv Malik sat with
Kirit and Neena
Mehta at their
office in Worli, an
industrial suburb of
Mumbai. During
animated
interviews, they

enthusiastically
shared their
thoughts and plans
for the
future—only two
percent of which,
they say, have
been realized so
far. First, excerpts
from Kirit's

comments:

What is the aim of Aastha?

Aastha means
faith. The aim of
Aastha is to
increase faith faith
in our people, faith
in our country,
faith in our religion
and faith in God.
Faith is something
which is not born.

In Hindi we say
that it pragats,
which means it
appears or
happens. Anything
that is born
ultimately dies.
This word aastha
was put by God in
my brain.

Is Aastha primarily for Hindus?

The biggest chunk
of these programs
is undoubtedly
Hindu in content,
because that is the

major faith here in
India. We are
definitely
propagating,
telecasting and
broadcasting
Hinduism. We
have no shame in
admitting this.
Absolutely not. We

are also a multilingual channel, although the predominant language is Hindi. Our broader target is to reach all of the religions and spiritual movements that

have come out of
India: Jainism,
Buddhism,
Sikhism,
Hinduism – all the
"isms" that were
born in India, and
more.

Besides being religious, how is Aastha different from other more secular Indian TV channels?

Normally a new

channel becomes popular in the big cities, then proliferates out to the smaller areas. Aastha made it first in small towns; then it went to big cities. Also, people

usually watch television from about eight in the morning until eleven at night. Aastha viewers watch from before dawn until after midnight. Forty million households

are connected to cable TV in India today. But the number of people actually watching is much more. In villages, where Aastha is most popular, people congregate in

community halls
and homes to
watch television
together.

Do you have any
religious programs
for the youth?

The negative
influence of the
West on our youth
is partly our fault.

We have encouraged it. But at the same time, Western countries and their people are being influenced by the Indian way of life and the "exotic East." Aastha tries

to show both the East and the West from a positive point of view, so that people can judge for themselves what is good and what is bad. The problem is that,

until now, the youth have not been getting any sort of religious education. Once you give them something— even a little bit— you will find that they want more. The

youth have a lot
of interest in
religion.

What is drawing youth toward Aastha?

They have
problems. They
have a lot more
problems than

older people do.
Old people have
fulfilled their
worldly
responsibilities.
The children are
just starting. We
are making a
great effort to
produce yoga and

meditation
programs for the
youth. In these
programs we are
trying to show
how religion and
science go
together, hand in
hand. Any
presentation of

religion that has a scientific approach will definitely attract the youth. They want to understand the meanings of the rituals they see others following

blindly.

Were not their
parents the same

way when they
were young?

There is a basic
difference in the
last three
generations. The
first generation

had blind faith.
The second
generation were
fence
sitters—neither
here nor there.
They just did what
their elders did.
This new
generation wants

clear answers to their questions and logical solutions to their problems. In yoga, they want to know, straight away, how they can attain liberation.

You have often
referred to your
TV channel as
"spiritual" rather
than "religious?"
What does
"spiritual" mean?

India's future
religious
programming will
be socio-spiritual,
and promoting it
this way is our
mission. The word
religion will not be
much used.
Spiritualism will

be our key word.
The prevailing
attitude will be:
"We cannot
change the world.
We can only
change
ourselves." This is
not to say that we
will be shy about

promoting
traditional
Hinduism. We will
not. But for
various
reasons—social,
political and
economical—we
do not want to
propagate it all

the time. Rather than preaching the teachings of Hinduism as a religion, we will talk about its best practices, such as tolerance, charity and other such positive things.

However, we
must also teach
basic Hinduism in
simple
terminology.

You recently covered the Kumbha Mela. Can you tell us a little about that?

We have covered a lot of religious

festivals,
including the
Kumbha Mela.
Before the Mela,
we were there
when the roads
were being built
and the
infrastructure of
the special city

was being
planned. During
the Mela, we
provided partial
coverage, live.
We had four
teams filming four
hours every day
for two months.
We were working

right with the UP government on this, and it was very successful. Hundreds of people told us that they had come to the Kumbha Mela only after watching it

on our channel.
During the next
Mela, we plan to
provide live
broadcast of the
whole thing right
through.

Does Aastha face difficulties?

For us, the biggest challenge is having enough money to go worldwide. As Bill

Gates had a dream of putting a computer in every house on Earth, we have a dream that every house around the globe should be watching Aastha. But we have had

so many
stumbling blocks
and so many
problems:
government
licenses, foreign
companies,
foreign
transmission,
Reserve Bank of

India permissions
and more. Yet
never has our
work stopped.
Where will the
money come
from? We do not
know. But it is
coming and we
are growing. In

the beginning, I
used to read all of
the mail myself.
Now it is just too
much.

Do you have any
competition?

There is
Doordarshan. But
in the name of
secularism,
Doordarshan has
never featured
spirituality-based
programs. This
niche has always
been absolutely

empty. Private players won't enter this field either. For them, the whole issue of religion is just too sensitive and causes too many problems, besides the fact that it

does not make money. It is true that this channel is not yet profitable. But it could be. I see "pay TV" as our ultimate revenue model. With a strong

subscription base,
we could make
this channel a
wholesome,
well-financed
platform of
communication,
completely free of
commercial
advertising. The

worldwide Hindu
and Indian
population is vast.
There should be
no difficulty in
raising revenue
from
subscriptions.

Can you speculate on the future of Aastha?

This work is at a
nascent stage.
We have not done
even two percent

of what we have
envisioned
ourselves doing.
We are holding
more than five
thousand years of
wisdom from
hundreds and
thousands of
saints and sages,

and we have not even begun to put a fraction of that forward. This channel will become a part of every Hindu household, just like water, electricity and

gas. The cable operators say that we are a very different channel for them. They say that once they start providing Aastha to the viewer, it stays. Once it

enters a home, it
enters forever.

Can you share
some of the
inspiration that
helped create
Aastha?

We wanted to utilize our money in a fine way. So we are doing this. Spiritual donations are of several types. There is anna daan, or the donation of food,

which would be effective only until the food is digested. The punyam (good merit) from this only lasts that much time. Then there is the donation of

clothes, which is effective until the clothes wear out, earning punyam for a little bit more time, but not much. Then there is the donation of something big,

like a house. The
punyam
connected to this
might last for
years but would
finally be gone
when the house
fell down. The
best donation of
all is gyan daan,

the donation of knowledge. It lasts not only one lifetime but many. So I asked my husband, "Why not undertake this job of gyan daan?" He thought it was a wonderful

idea. Now, there could have been several ways to perform gyan daan. We could have distributed books, for instance, but not everybody can read books. The

obvious option for us was to perform this service through the media. In two years time our dreams of doing this have come true. I fully believe that if

one's intentions
are good, then
good happens.
Even our karmas
are created,
based on our
intentions. How
Aastha has come
up is truly a
miracle. That is

why we continue
to put our heart
and soul into it.
We have realized
that due to
faith~□ which is
the meaning of
aastha~□ much
can be achieved.
The whole world

should have faith,
and the whole
world should
progress. Things
may be difficult to
achieve, but they
are never
absolutely
impossible. Our
story is like a

dream story that
you might see on
television.

Preserving a
Heritage of
Devotional

Bliss

Against all
odds, Dilip
Kabra holds his

own with TV
media giants

Brothers Dilip
and Dinesh
Kabra own and
operate

Sanskar, which
like Aasthais
strongly
disadvantaged
on a playing
field long
dominated by
well

established,
secular
television
giants. Dilip
talks with
Hinduism Today
correspondent
Rajiv Malik

about the
challenges,
rewards and
prospects of
this difficult
work.

What is
Sanskar trying
to achieve with
religious TV?

We are a part

of a civilization
that is
devotional by
temperament.
In our tradition
we stress
bhavananda,
the bliss of

devotion, and
not
bhoganda,
the bliss of
material life.
From the
influence of
this attitude

through the
ages,
barbarians
have become
civilized and
civilized men
have become
saints. Yet

today we are
not fully
following this
path of
bhavananda.
More can be
done. Religious
media can help

by being a sort of modern-day guru. To be more precise, TV stations like Sanskar can act as mediums between India's

great gurus
and the
masses. There
is also here a
wonderful
example of
time
management

for today's
rush-rush
generation.
While one
person may
spend years
striving
diligently to

understand a
certain
scripture, we
can if we do
our job
intelligently
take the
essence of that

scripture, distill
it down and
provide it for
him and others
in one concise
ten-minute TV
segment. There
is a great

power here.
Our duty is to
select the
correct
material and
present it in
the right way. If
the right

message
reaches the
right people
which are
primarily the
youth. Our job
is done. And, of
course, we do

not have to
create anything
new. Our great
rishis have
given us more
than we could
ever possibly
use.

Who is your
primary
audience?

Seventy
percent of our

audience
consists of
women. In rural
areas and
villages, after
the husbands
leave for work,
the wives

watch us. Even
while working
around the
house. Bhajan
is a big part of
bhakti
(devotion). Our
perspective on

life benefits
from the
discourses, but
bhajan is
important for
devotion. When
a circus comes
to a village,

music will be
played first to
gather a crowd.
In the same
way, we
provide the
best possible
bhajan first to

establish a
bond with our
viewers. Then
the holy men
will speak.

What do these
holy men say?
What is
Sanskar's
message?

We feature
Hinduism. If
you ask why
we feature
Hinduism, I say
that it is
because
Hinduism is the

fundamental
civilization of
man. Where
culture,
devotion and
religion come
into play, we
must work very

cautiously. We must know the subject which we are delivering. Only in this way can we be correct and successful

in educating
the people.
Today our
channel is
considered to
be a spiritual
channel. This is
some mark of

our success.

How is Sanskar

doing
financially?

Everything is
going fairly well
right now. I am

convinced that
if we present
the right
content with
the right
attitude, we
will get the
right support.

On this
channel,
content is king.
If we sacrifice
content for
money, then
problems will
arise. We are

running this
channel at a
very low
profile. A
ten-second
advertisement
on a premium
channel would

cost perhaps
\$4,000. That
same slot on
Sanskar is only
about \$25. We
are competing
with these big
commercial

channels for
everything:
advertisement,
viewership,
even resources
and
employees. Of
course, this

makes it
difficult.

Do these
difficulties
cause a quality
loss in your
broadcasting?

Our strongest point is that we carefully choose, analyze and edit what we present. Our viewers expect

to see
something that
will touch their
hearts and
minds. If we
become
successful in
establishing

intelligent
devotion, then
we will be
successful in
making an
impact. The
impact will
bring the

viewers and
hold them.

With limited
means, a lot
can be done. A

bhajan singer
does not spend
money on
writing scripts
or verses. A
monk requires
no overhead.
We have lots of

plans for the
future. There
are many
surprises in
store. Stay
tuned.