

GEC fictions: The Finite vs infinite debate

After the breakthrough success of Naagin, a finite series show on Colors, the discussion has restarted in the television fraternity whether the era of long-running shows is over. Despite one or two successes in finite launches, industry experts largely believe that Indians are skewed towards longer running shows

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As on date, the Hindi general entertainment channels have been thriving on fiction shows with occasional sumptuous meals in the form of reality shows. Each of the channels have been hosting 6-8 fiction shows at any given point in time, and experimenting with formats and stories within the sub-genre.

The world of general entertainment has tried and tested many things including juggling between weeklies to dailies, afternoon primetime to evening primetime, and the most recent one being finite series shows. So, when you encountered 24 (Colors) and Mahabharata (Star Plus) recently with only 24 and 52 episodes, respectively, weren't you prepared that the show will have a logical end, instead of never-ending twists and turns?

There have been shows like Kyunki Saas bhi Kabhi Bahu thi, Kasautii Zindagi Kay, Kahani Ghar Ghar Ki and Kumkum, all running for over 1,500 episodes each spread across six years or more. In the current scenario, while there are finite episode shows such as Yudh (Sony), the top show of the genre, Naagin (Colors), and Meri Awaaz Hi Pehchaan Hai (&TV), there is another set which has been telecast for over 1,000 episodes including Yeh Rishta Kya Kehlata Hai (Star Plus), Taarak Mehta Ka Ooltah Chashmah (Sab TV) and Balika Vadhu (Colors).

BestMediaInfo.com spoke to a few broadcasters and industry experts to understand which of the two formats has found better comfort with the audience and advertisers? What does it take to make either of the formats successful?

The storyline yardstick

Abhimanyu Singh, CEO and Founder, Contiloe Pictures, the production house of Maharana Pratap, Chhatrapati Shivaji and Jhansi Ki Rani, feels that variety is a must and hence both formats will co-exist.

“The channels cannot be offering the same type of entertainment. Ultimately, everything finds its position and audience. As for the finiteness of shows, I believe that finite series is not only for a certain number of episodes, it’s more about the proper start and end of the storyline. On this basis, even if Maharana Pratap ran for 600 episodes straight, it was a finite series owing to the fact that the climax was fixed,” explained Singh.

He picks out the mythological and historic genre since these, though they are generally long, are finite shows. “This sub-genre has an inherently finite storyline which runs with the journey of the character. The moment the character comes to end, the show has to be shut down,” he said.

On the other hand, fictional characters have a better capacity to get elongated and stretched journeys, say a few others. One of those who vouched for this line is the creator of the longest running fiction drama show of all time on television, Balika Vadhu. Sunjoy Waddhwa, CMD, Sphereorigins, said, “When the show is based on a specific storyline, it has to have an end. However, a fictional character can have a long journey. The character driven shows need consistency and must revolve around the basic theme of the show. Balika Vadhu has been talking about the child marriage issue and while the story has moved on from the main protagonist Anandi to her daughter Nimboli (who is now another protagonist in the story), the issue being dealt with is the same.”



NP Singh

NP Singh, CEO, Sony Pictures Networks India, in an earlier interview, had accepted that shows on the channel had been pulled off in the past as they reached a logical climax. “I don’t think making a show run for years adds to its performance. We have pulled shows off air even if they were on the top of the popularity charts. I think telling a good, impactful and interesting story is more important than the number of episodes that the show is running.”

These include shows like *Bade Achhe Lagte Hain* and *Itna Karo Na Mujhe Pyaar*, believed by some to be finite series, despite having run for over 18-24 months. "When the story finds an organic end and is closed, it is a finite series, like *Maharana Pratap*. However, pre-decided number of episodes as in the case of 24 gives a better budgeting option to the broadcaster," explained Singh, adding that "with the decreasing attention span of audiences, finite series ought to perform better and might capture the GEC space in a big way."

Media perspective

Contradicting the idea, media planners largely vouch for the long-running shows and give a heads-up to the likes of *Balika Vadhu* that ensure a certain number of eyeballs to the advertiser. Navin Khemka, Managing Partner, Maxus, believes that long-running shows make better sense of continuity for viewers. "Long runs tend to do better and assure the advertisers too. Since Hindi GEC is a major driver of reach for brands, it is an important part of the media mix. Buying is flexible. But Hindi GECs cannot be a risk taking genre. Plus, the main problem in the finite series concept is that by the time loyalty and appointment viewing is built, the show is coming to an end."

While many compare Indian TV market to western markets, it must be noted that audiences are very different. Indian audiences have long forgotten the weekly concept and hence running a daily show for 26 or 50 episodes will require broadcasters to keep looking for newer storylines every month or two.



Pradeep Hejmadi

Pradeep Hejmadi, Business Head, Zee TV, pointed out how the production cycles and costs are very different in the western market. "It is simply wrong to compare the two markets. Despite all the markets being quite mature, the audiences, availability of actors and costs are very different. In India, more than the economic viability for the channel, what is more important in both formats is that the story must have a proper creative angle to it. The journey of characters has to be clearly told by the producers and the broadcaster must be able to sense if fatigue is creeping in."

He also points out the crucial role of writers in this scenario and how finite series need very expert script writing skills.

Waddhwa also pointed out the main difference in the treatment of the two formats. "Finite series is more like an extended film with a start-mid-end formula. However, TV serials running for over a year already have seen a lot of suddenly added twists and

turns, so they, according to me, are not finite ones. Plus, the broadcasters (in cases of Sasural Simar Ka, Yeh Rishta Kya Kehlata Hai and all other such shows) are feeding the audiences with what they are asking for.”

Way back in 2001, one may recall that Sony was the first one with Kutumb running into two seasons, each being a limited episode show. A similar effort was made by the channel in 2015, when it launched the second season of its previously popular show, Parvarish. Star Plus too did it in 2016, when they launched their popular show, Is Pyar Ko Kya Naam Doon.

Despite there being one or two successes in finite launches, industry experts largely believe that Indians are more accustomed and skewed towards the longer running shows.

Advertisers’ dilemma

Amol Mohandas, another media expert tells how advertisers, in case of finite series, have to clearly depend on the time band performance instead of show ratings. “The finite series need replacement in every 3-4 months. The advertiser has to keep investing – or not investing – monies based on the performance of the earlier show in that time slot. That is a dicey situation compared to the long runs where there is a clear assurance of the minimum ratings that the show and characters will attract.”

He also clarifies that long run formats are majorly used for frequency and reach, while short formats will be better for specific time-bound marketing campaigns or brand launches. “Finite series have a huge scope of attracting sampling audiences, while long runs promise appointment viewing.”