

Kabul TV airs first Afghan commercial serial made by Indians



'Palwasha' director Prasant Satapathy speaking at the premiere of the television serial in Kabul.

Loud music, action, replays of the same expression, reverberating dialogues, lots of tears and tense drama — the Indian living room is going to Afghanistan, in Dari and Pashto.

Starting November 25, TV sets in Afghanistan started beaming 'Palwasha' ('The Rays of Rising Sun'), the country's first home-made commercial serial. The serial is shot in Kabul but directed by an Indian. Also the technical team, make-up men and sound engineers were flown in from Mumbai.

After dubbed versions of Indian mega soaps like 'Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi' and 'Heena', 'Palwasha' tells the story of an Afghan woman of the same name and her journey as a daughter, sister and more significantly, the first female judge in an Afghan provincial court.

Sure enough, the "serial on law and justice through a family drama" starts with a court sequence — the staple of so many Hindi serials and Bollywood movies — where a young Palwasha, trembling, hands down a 10-year jail sentence to a murderer, who is her brother!

Says serial director Prasant Satapathy, a 11-year Doordarshan veteran: "The social prop-

aganda of the 20-episode serial is the uplift of the Afghan woman and the triumph of justice. We are trying to instruct Afghans that they should trust the legal system based on the Shariat and the Quran, and not resort to handing out justice by themselves."

Satapathy is now working for Aina, a Kabul-based NGO, which is producing 'Palwasha' with 40 percent funding from USAID. "We are setting a precedent in the entertainment industry here. No one has shot court scenes before in this country, and we had a Supreme Court judge with us to help during shooting," says Satapathy.

"People love these serials so much that they have started adopting customs depicted in them. We heard that an Afghan boy started praying to a *tulsi* plant in Kabul which led to a violent reaction from his father. The Indian influence on culture here has been debated in Parliament and is being perceived as a threat to Afghan culture," says Satapathy. "But in this serial, the cultural context is entirely Afghan, made just for this audience," he adds. Mumbai-based actor Sonal Udeshi plays 'Palwasha' while Viveki Prakash, who has

been involved with the news-based Indian programme 'Sansani', is the assistant-director.

In fact, the popularity of Indian serials have taken many in Afghanistan by surprise, especially considering the trouble, viewers go through just to switch on their TV sets.

Says Deputy Minister of Energy M. Sediq Ashan: "Only 10-15 percent of Afghanistan has electricity. This is mainly through hydro-electric power. For those who don't have the supply, houses and TVs are run by diesel generators."

Yet, "Kabul stops when Indian TV serials come on air", says Ramika Ahmad, executive director, Meco Construction and Road Building Company, and a member of the erstwhile royal family which was exiled during Taliban rule. "This is our favourite form of entertainment," says Ahmad, adding, "My personal favourite is 'Heena'. I bought a TV for my cook as he insisted on watching Tulsi in 'Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi'. We love Indian family dramas, as we have large families too. We can identify with the traditional values endorsed in these serials. Like Indian women, Afghan women also love to dress up." ■