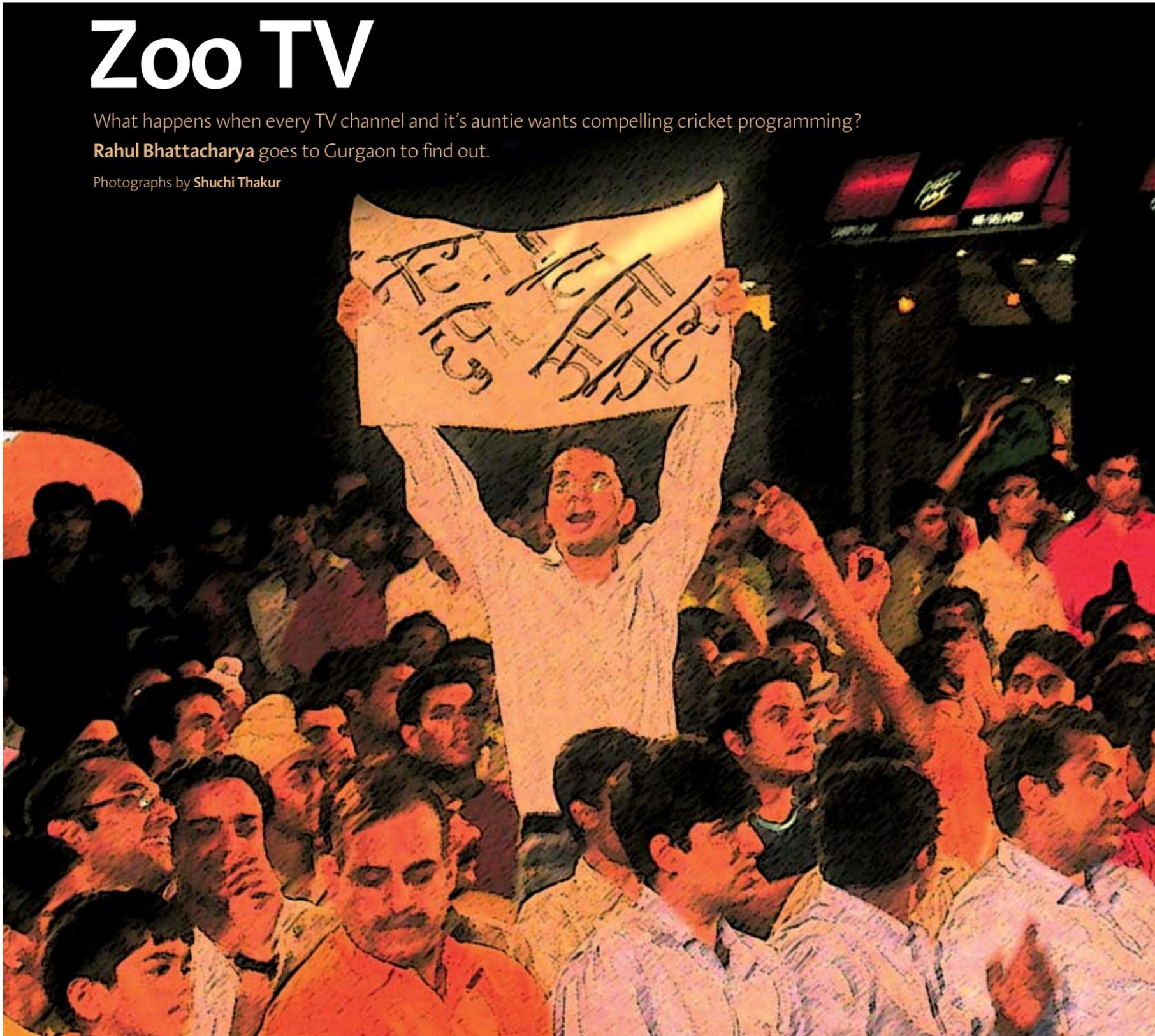


Zoo TV

What happens when every TV channel and its auntie wants compelling cricket programming?

Rahul Bhattacharya goes to Gurgaon to find out.

Photographs by Shuchi Thakur



There is a programme on India's most watched television news channel called *Match Ke Mujrim*. This translates into Criminals of the Match or, more charitably, Culprits of the Match. It goes like this.

On the evening of every India match day a mass of people is gathered at a venue, usually in a small town in the Hindi-speaking north, to which Star News primarily caters. Some portion of their estimated 20-million viewers tune in, mobile phones at the ready. Four potential *mujrim*s from the day's cricket are nominated. Of them one will be voted the main culprit. Every Indian player could have put in a perfect winning performance but the manhunt will proceed.

The game finishes after 30 minutes – it used to be 60 – of sound and fury, of climbing and falling vote-share graphs. The crowd, spurred on by the anchor and a prosecution attorney on a podium, will have tried the cricketers; anywhere between 5,000 and 10,000 will have managed to squeeze in their SMSes in the time.

There is something perversely intriguing about the exercise. Irredeemably vulgar, unknowingly comic, reductive, Indian: the *tamasha*, the blame game, the sense of anger, but at the heart of the anger, really, a futility that nothing will ever come of anything so get it off your chest and struggle on.

Cricinfo Magazine followed proceedings on the night of the Zimbabwe tri-series final loss in September at a glitzy mall in Gurgaon, before a small, metropolitan gathering, maybe 300, and two experts – Bishan Singh Bedi, naturally, as prosecutor (also “the voice of the public”, the assumption disconcertingly tacit) and Syed Kirmani, the “unsuccessful defence lawyer”.

It was a curiously bland affair: nobody seemed to be carrying nooses. A few banners were around, though, uniform black felt on white chart-paper in identical hand. “Nehra, *chhupa le apna chehra*” (Nehra, hide your face). “Ganguly *hatao, desh bachao*” (Remove Ganguly, save the country). “Dravid, *dhah gayi deewar*” (Dravid, the wall has collapsed).

The Gurgaon final can be considered a momentous occasion in the annals of *Match ke Mujrim* because it was here that Sourav Ganguly was disbarred from the game. He took the suspense out of the exercise: of the 27 match-days involving him since the show began during the home series against Pakistan last March, Ganguly had been the *mujrim* some 20 times. Moreover he tended to sweep the polls, hitting the high seventies and early eighties, whereas otherwise the split is more or less even. Better than anyone else, Star News has understood that the easiest way of starting a fight in India is to say the word “Ganguly” in a crowd.

The show proceeded with the natural absurdity of a school debates competition, where the idea of the activity, rather than to expand minds, is to make kids stick by a designated view in an outwardly convincing manner. Kirmani, poor chap, had no chance in this scheme of things. Bedi had not much to do. In the past he had called Harbhajan Singh a “*chor*” (thief) and a “*chichora*” (an abusive amalgam of petty, vulgar and immature), and promised the crowd, to its vocal delight, that as a follow-up to Ganguly taking off his shirt at Lord's, his pants were going to be taken off here by them all. A 12th one-day final loss out of 16 times simplified his task considerably.

A middle-aged gent with a white moustache asked whether it would not be a good idea to offer a walkover every final to save them from ignominy. An aggrieved youngster wondered why Irfan Pathan's form never deserted him in commercials. A young lady ripped the very manhood out of Ashish Nehra and drew applause for her passion. A man with an agreeable smile felt it was time to banish Dravid from the team after this wretched series: and Dravid it was who walked off with the night's honour.

The thing finished amid revelry from a group of young boys, jumping and waving their posters with a chant like hammer to metal. Was it about Ganguly? No. It was, simply: “ITM” – the name of their college. But the posters? “*Yaar*, they were given to us by the channel *waale*. They called us here. Are we mad to waste our evening on this otherwise?”

Uday Shankar, CEO and editor of Star News, speaks up for *Match ke Mujrim*. He argues that “in this country increasingly the grounds of accountability in public domain are getting eroded. Politicians are always held accountable, business people are always held accountable, we go and examine small little things that other celebrities do, so what is so special about our cricketers?”

He feels that “even though the BCCI is a private body and cricketers are not paid directly by the people of the country, people spend so much of their material and emotional resource on this team. We thought we needed to give people a forum to connect and express their ideas. I think somewhere accountability has to be brought in and I'm proud of the role Star News is playing.”

Stirring talk but quite thoroughly unconvincing. Does faux-crucifixion of players truly add accountability? “It's a start. Give us a year. Not just Star News but all other channels will follow our lead.”

Sidhu looks at himself not so much as an expert but as a spectacle. The man is a monster, the man is a marvel. He is able to always shout, always respond without stutter or delay, and never to doubt the strength of his point, however irrelevant

Is the handing out of inflammatory posters to an audience, this part-staged passion, in any way defensible? A denial is placed on the record. But there is no reason to disbelieve the ITM student – or, indeed, the Star News employee present at the site who confirmed the fact.

Would the channel have gone through with a similar show were India on a winning spree? “Sure,” he says, “The idea is to get the team to perform better and better.”

But there was no *Match ke Mujrim* during the Test matches against Zimbabwe which followed, where victories were assured.

Indeed, it all began to look a bit silly as India shook off their one-day woes with a spanking start to the home season under a new captain. Somehow a villain was unearthed after the thumping opening win against Sri Lanka at Nagpur (Yuvraj Singh – 14 off 18 balls and out to a dodgy decision). The next win, at Mohali, coincided with the dropping of Ganguly from the squad, and so the poll was modified into whether Ganguly could fit into the World Cup team or not. After a third win on the run, the question became whether there was indeed any *mujrim* left in this team, whereupon Bedi modestly conceded that his work was finished since his words had been heeded. And so on. By the time India won the second one-dayer against South Africa, the show was pulled off air. It is scheduled back on for the tour of Pakistan.

In theory, *Match ke Mujrim* is a successful, some might say ingenious, blend of three or four ingredients. There is cricket, of course. Then there is the suggestion of crime (*Sansani*, the crime show on Star News, is one of the most popular programmes on Indian news television). Integrated with this is the newest television mantra: interactivity. Here, not only are the baser instincts of viewers catered to, by inverting the formula and asking them to pick villains rather than heroes, but the format is such that both television and live audiences are co-opted; most programmes manage one or the other. In this, Star News is a step ahead of its rivals.

The rivals are many and the competition very intense. According to a paper by Nalin Mehta to be published in the journal *Sport and Society*, there are already an astounding 16 round-the-clock news channels in Hindi and English alone, while news is broadcast on 30 channels in eight languages.

Virtually every network now owns a cricket-only show – this apart from the updates and sports bulletins, and the kind of insufferable live coverage that greeted, for example, the appointment of India’s new coach in May. This is understandable but not usual. Perhaps we have on our hands a unique combination of a nascent and exploding media and a single pan-national sport, but it is worth pointing out that none of the major general news channels in the USA, Australia, or England – where Sky have a dedicated sports-news channel as part of their five-channel sports bouquet – features extensive single-sport programming.

As Mehta argues in his study, the significance of cricket on Indian news television is exaggerated by the structure of the market. Because the television economy in India opened up under the, well, somewhat rusty Indian Telegraph Act of 1885, networks were unable to gain control over their own distribution, which fell into the hands of the dreaded “cable operators”, who continue to substantially under-report the number of subscribers. Thus the revenue model in the Indian television industry is more skewed towards advertisers than consumers (up to 80 per cent) than in virtually any other part of the world. This, coupled with terribly unsophisticated viewer-tracking systems, means that channels are constantly trying to reach for the lowest common denominator to draw in advertisers. Cricket in India is one-size fits all. It is oblivious to



Courtesy NDTV (Sidhu, 2)

geography, wealth, age and, increasingly, gender. It is a mighty tool.

We thus find ourselves in an age of the inescapable cricket discussion with the ubiquitous cricketer-expert. Star News itself, besides *Match ke Mujrim*, runs a number of specials, previews and reviews with Sandeep Patil. Aaj Tak uses Saba Karim and Madan Lal for the *Wisden Show* before play and during every interval on match days, apart from the many, sometimes hour-long, special packages. Headlines Today, the English channel from the same stable, follows a similar formula. Channel 7 does an hour-long call-in show, *Showdown*, with Ajay Jadeja and another celebrity guest on every match- and pre-match day; it is also now running the heavily publicised *Speedster Challenge*, a hunt for the fastest amateur bowlers in the country. Zee News, during series, runs a 30-minute live interactive show, *Ghamasaan*, every morning and evening with, currently, Chetan Chauhan. India TV, during matches, uses Chetan Sharma for *Cricket Xtra*, a 10-minute experts’ interpretation *every hour*, and has plans for a weekly cricket show. Sahara Samay does a one-hour show, *Silly Point*, on and before every Indian cricket day, with a revolving cast that includes Maninder Singh, Kirti Azad, Ashok Malhotra and Javagal Srinath. The NDTV sister channels – 24x7 and India – have slotted in weekly one-hour programmes, *Cricket Controversies* and *Kissa Cricket Ka*, one-hour sit-down audience shows, apart from *Turning Point* and *Googly*, which are half-hour analysis sessions on match days, all of them with Navjot Singh Sidhu.

While the channels do a fine job of keeping viewers updated with news, views and scores, the amount of content they must produce feels like so much excess baggage. In the pursuit to tell the same story in different ways, the programming is, by and large, pointlessly aggressive, repetitiously inane, amusingly melodramatic or a mix of these. Virtually all of it lacks rigour.

The circus is in town: the audience at a *Mujrim* shoot below; Bedi and Kirmani on jury duty middle; Sidhu holds court bottom and left



Rajdeep Sardesai, a cricket aficionado and editor-in-chief of the forthcoming 24-hour English news channel CNN-IBN, finds coverage increasingly and uncomfortably gravitating towards trivia and, more so, towards “gladiatorial programming”. Sardesai’s own *Big Fight* for his former employer NDTV, formatted along the lines of the US presidential debates, was the first successful Indian audience-oriented programme in this genre.

“Yes,” he says, “you could argue that perhaps *Big Fight* fell into that trap and therefore sometimes the heat and dust generated were greater than the light. With every passing show it became harder. You looked for extreme opinions because moderate opinions did not elicit the same kind of passions. Perhaps it was the weakness of the show, perhaps it is the weakness of our system at the moment.”

“Cricket does sell,” he adds. “I once did an interview with Virender Sehwag for the Hindi show *Takkur* and the ratings for that were much higher than for politicians and even film stars. But at the moment Hindi channels are in such a competitive market that they are constantly trying to find ways in which to differentiate themselves from their rivals, and if that means living in a normless world then so be it. There are no norms left in Indian television in general and Hindi television in particular.”

How will the arrival of two new 24-hour English channels affect coverage? “I’d like to think there is space for something more intelligent. Yet the pressure is intensifying all the time to be more and more innovative, more and more sensational, more and more provocative.”

In this simultaneous pursuit of the trivial and the gladiatorial, there is bound to arise a tension beyond the usual. Both journalists and players have felt its brunt. “Why do you want to talk to me? I’m

a *mujrim* am I not?” a Star News reporter was asked some time ago. Towards the later stages of the series against Pakistan at home last year, a beleaguered Ganguly, at the very nadir of his popularity, put in a request that the show be stopped. Another player refused to speak to a channel which flashed an SMS from a viewer observing that his servant could play better than Ganguly – a remark frankly more revealing about India’s attitudes towards its poor than towards its cricketers.

Counters prosecutor Bedi: “I always used to consider a critic my best friend. My sincere advice to people is to not take *Match ke Mujrim*, not to take me, too seriously. There is a light-hearted element to it. But yes, I do hope we are able to do something for the heroes, not just the zeroes.”

Probably the most engaging of the programmes (also among the least-viewed because of the channel’s low penetration) is *Silly Point* on Sahara Samay, because it is the least artificial. Free-flowing, unrestrained, it centres on a three- or four-way conversation, and captures the spirit of a discussion as it might happen between followers or, in this case, Test cricketers. Of course, this also means allegations fly thick and fast. One of its mainstays, Kirti Azad, like Bedi, is well-regarded in news television partly because of a reputation for “telling it like it is” – which is usually at the expense of nuance or balance. Neither of them, though, can compete with the undisputed *badshah* of cricket on news television, Navjot Singh Sidhu.

Whether or not he makes chowder of your brain, Sidhu’s gifts – his stamina, his memory – are properly extraordinary. And rating-points crunchers vouch that he has attracted many more people to cricket programming than he has driven away.

Sidhu symbolises what it’s come to. He looks at himself not so much as an expert as a spectacle. He prepares accordingly. He will ring in all day to find out what kind of questions are to be expected; often he will request a question so that he may utilise, not statistics or background research or historical parallels, but his newest proverb or *sher*. On the show he is perched upon a stool, beneath the cushion of which rests a notebook that contains his aphorisms. During breaks he will whip it out from underneath him for a quick reference; he will practise saying them with his most trusted expressions and gestures. Not all of it will be appetising. (“*Kya thook mein pakode ban sakte hain? Kya moot mein machliyaan ho sakti hain?*” – Can *pakodas* be fried in spit? Can fish swim in urine? In other words, are not some tasks impossible?) He is able to always shout, always respond without stutter or delay, and never doubt the strength of his point no matter how uninformed or irrelevant. He is so overbearing that some journalists refuse the invitation to appear on his show. He is so outrageous that it’s hard to not stop and gawk. With Sidhu the circus is complete. The man is a monster, the man is a marvel. The man is the most sought-after and best-paid on the circuit.

None of this is to make a statement about print versus television or sports versus news, for each has its limitations and its advantages, its high and low points. Rather, the suffusion of cricket programming in the burgeoning world of round-the-clock news-television is only the most recent acknowledgement of the point that cricket is not played in a vacuum, that it exists within a social, political and economic order, and that it is an intimate part of many people’s lives. The reality is that much of what we have now, far from making sense of the madness that is Indian cricket, only lays madness upon madness or else creates a parallel madness. If indeed we are in store for a more fulfilling future, as Uday Shankar suggests, this phase will as likely be remembered as passing folly as necessary rite. [B](#)