

IIFTC 2020 KNOWLEDGE SERIES

A Netflix Hour
Featuring
Aashish Singh

Fireside Chat with Aashish Singh, Director - Original Film, Netflix India with Mikael Svensson (Head of South Sweden Film Commission & General Secretary - EUFCN)

Mikael: First time we met you were working for Yash Raj and you were working there for many years, so the first question is why did you leave Yash Raj ? And what is the difference between working in Yash Raj & Netflix?

Aashish: Yash Raj is such a great company. There is no real reason to leave, but it was my own mental saturation. I thought, it's been 15 years now so what do I do next? So, I thought to take up some new challenge and that is the reason why I left Yash Raj .

To answer your second question, well, it is quite different. At Yashraj or any studio in India, if you make a film you are typically catering to about 35-40 million people on the ticket sales. But in Netflix, you are catering to about 168 million people worldwide and this is just the subscriber base. So, when you create films for the studio in India, you have a lot of data to say that this has worked or this has not worked. But when you are creating (content) for a streaming platform such as Netflix, which is still new in India you have to first figure out whom should we be creating content for? And what is the subscriber looking for 2 years down the line? etc.

Mikael: Production companies come to you with all their projects but do you also commission your ideas to the production companies?

Aashish: Yes, so most of the times the producers, directors and the creative community come with their own ideas and pitch their stories and films to us. But there are times when an independent writer reaches out to us and if we find a compelling story, we find a good director and producer for this film. Since it is still early days (for Netflix in India) most of the stuff we do is currently partner managed, which means that we assign a production services company to take care of the production.

Mikael: Since we have film commissioners in the audience, how do you choose locations in your story telling? Is it an important part of your story telling?

Aashish: Locations are the most important part, because at Netflix we believe that the stories have to be authentic. We are not really catering or making films or series for the theatres so we do not have any box office pressure. Earlier in the 80's we used to jump from a song in India into Switzerland but it has all changed now. We have to create authentic stories, which guide us where the location should be and we want to just go with the creator's mind. (For instance) Bard of Blood demanded it to look like Afghanistan so we had to shoot in Ladakh since we couldn't go to Afghanistan.

Mikael: How many projects have you so far shot outside India?

Aashish: Sacred Games was one series that we shot in South Africa extensively. Lot of our films or series are still not shot abroad since it is still early days (in India) but globally the shows are so big, they travel (to other countries). There are many examples of shows that have done so much for the tourism of that country.

Mikael: Are you also approached by companies from outside India. For example if you are approached by a German production company that has rights for an Indian book you will still consider it?

Aashish: Absolutely, without a doubt! For us there are no borders and as long as that producer, director, or writer understands what we are looking for and we know that he or she is able to make a very engaging content for us, we will do it.

Mikael: For me India is a country of stories, there is a story behind every corner in India. How do you see that with the old stories like the Ramayana and Mahabharata? Is that something you are looking into?



Aashish: We are open to anything, so nothing stops us from doing a mythological or a historical film or series. We are open to any kind of content. In fact, there is an animation show called 'Mighty Little Bheem' that came out of India and it's been watched by 27 million people across the world, which does a lot of good for Indian filmmakers and the culture in a way. So that is another way of looking at these platforms, where you can actually tell stories that come from your culture and are watched by the world.

Mikael: What are the most common genres you get?

Aashish: Typically, people think that streaming is still a little dark, so lot of it is thrillers, dramas and sexual in nature. We want to open the funnel and try to balance that out. We don't restrict ourselves by any genre and we are open to any exciting content.

Mikael: Filmmakers today are not really bound by any formulas; do you see that creativity has become better and higher in terms of quality than before?

Aashish: I believe that the creativity becomes better because there is no box office pressure, they don't have to figure out how will they market the film or how will the first promo look like, etc. So, it is very authentic what the creators

come up with and we back their vision.

Mikael: The OTT sector in India is so big and there are so many platforms, so what is going to happen?

Aashish: I would say sky is the limit! The broadband penetration is so low right now in India that as the broadband increases and people become more aware about OTT. Currently if we are talking about 50 million numbers, a lot of it is from tier 1 cities. India is such a huge market, when you can actually reach the tier 2 and tier 3 cities.

Mikael: I was so impressed by the new scheme that you have, streaming only for mobile phones for a cheaper price. What would you like to say about it?

Aashish: Initially we were priced a lot higher than what the market demanded. It was very close to global standards in terms of pricing and India being a very unique market, payments were a challenge since people were not used to using their credit cards to pay for streaming. Also, we realised that there is a certain kind of consumer who just likes to be by themselves while watching content so, we came up with this INR 199 plan in August last year (2019) wherein one person could just watch their content on one device i.e. on the mobile phone or iPad and that's been a huge success.

Mikael: So, will you start doing special content for mobile phones for low budgets or will it be the same content across all platforms?

Aashish: It will be the same content because there is no reason to compromise on the content just because somebody is paying INR 199.

Mikael: Have you inspired other countries to do the same with the mobile phone plan?

Aashish: Yes, we are exploring it in other countries. We have also discovered that a lot of Southeast Asian countries have this problem of payments because of the dollar value (conversion rate) to the (local) currencies so it makes sense to keep a cheaper plan for them.

Mikael: I need to ask if you have any new ideas for Netflix India or any secrets you want to talk about?

Aashish: Honestly, I can't really share all our plans for the future and a secret that everybody knows is that content is king. We are working very closely with all the creative minds and we want to give them all the support in terms of keeping quality, VFX and the cameras that we use and to be future protected in terms of technology.

Mikael: Anything else that you feel we haven't covered and maybe you want to tell the audience?

Aashish: Since we have a lot of film commissioners here, all I can guarantee you is that we will be creating a lot of content as Netflix and we have commissioned officially about 3000 crores (USD400 million approx..) over 2019 and 2020 to make content between films and series and this number will only go up. This means that the Indian content will really travel globally so it will make a lot of sense to consider India as a special market.

Q & A with the audience

Audience: What is the right way to approach Netflix to present our project and how do we ensure that whatever we present is read by Netflix? Second question is Amazon has started giving producers the chance to put up their content on the pay per view platform so does Netflix have any such model?

Aashish: So, to answer your second question first, we don't have such plans as we speak, we have to understand that amazon is a very different model, it is more like a marketplace, their main business model is selling something else. Regarding your first question, initially we request only for the synopsis because that gives us an idea about the story. If we like the synopsis then we ask for the bible, a 5 pager, which talks about the log line, the synopsis, the proposed cast, director, writer, thoughts about the world like where it could be shot, locations, DOP, etc. to get a fairer idea about what is the thinking behind that content and if we like that, then we ask for the script for reviewing. The time of reviewing can range from 30 days to 60 days and if the story is super exciting there is a fair chance you can get a call within a week or 10 days.

Audience: What exactly is the plan of Netflix in the regional space?

Aashish: Currently, we are focusing in the Hindi Market and we want to first build that subscriber base. We will definitely look at the other languages after we have a strong base in the Hindi market. The challenge here is we can't just do a one off, we have to have a follow up so it will have to be then focused in that language.

Audience: There are a lot of middle men who tell us that they will get you in touch with Netflix, can you give us the names of the authorized aggregators or who are the right guys to approach?

Aashish: With Netflix, if you are talking about Original content, we do not have any middlemen, you have to pitch it (your content) to the executives directly. From a licensing point of view there are only two aggregators i.e. Film Karawan and Vista.

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