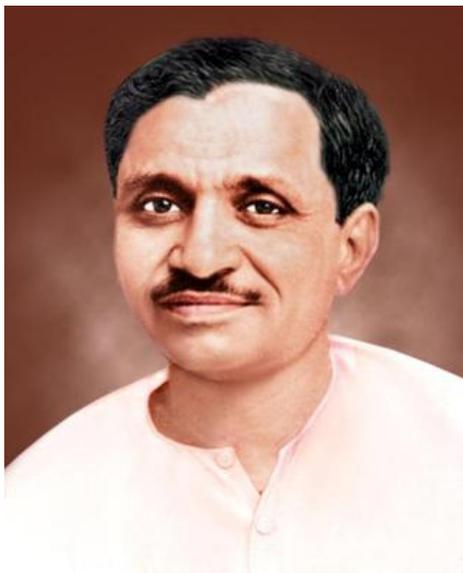


Doordarshan's impending policy shift has serial producers worried

- Special Correspondent



Deen Dayal Upadhyay

September 30 is the date earmarked for Doordarshan's transition to a regime where prime-time slots would be auctioned to the highest bidder.

At the end of the Prasar Bharati Board meeting on Monday, the members agreed on one thing: The two biopics on Deen Dayal Upadhyay and Savitribai Phule would be aired, as would 17 other serials.

But there was a caveat. The telecast of the serials would have to be wound up by September 30, the date earmarked for Doordarshan's transition to a regime where prime-time slots would be auctioned to the highest bidder. The move has raised fears that the Public Service Broadcaster is opening its doors to big-time producers in pursuit of revenues that it surely needs. It has also laid the grounds for protracted negotiations with producers, most of whom are unwilling to air their serials on non-prime time slots.

The meeting of the Prasar Bharati Board was also attended by the Information and Broadcasting Secretary Ajay Mittal. The Ministry does not have an additional secretary-level official who attends the Corporation's Board meetings. While the decision to air the biopics and serials appeared to have bought peace with the producers who were clearly unhappy with the announcement of a policy shift, it wasn't clear whether they would fall in line.

Actor Arun Govil, who was commissioned by Doordarshan to produce the biopic on Deen Dayal Upadhyay, wasn't sure whether he would finish producing the series let alone wrap it up by September 30.

'Not at non-prime time'

Other producers too were not sure if their serials would be aired on prime-time as the slots were limited. "We do not wish our serials to be shown at non-prime time as that would mean incurring huge losses," some of them said. Rupesh Govil, producer of *Savitribai Phule*, said he would require at least 130 episodes at prime time to do justice to the feminist icon.

The rates of commissioning are as low Rs. 1.75 lakh per episode at non-prime time to Rs. 7 lakh per episode in super prime time slots. Typically, an approval is given for 26 episodes. The presence of Mr. Mittal at the Board meeting had a salutary effect on the proceedings, said sources. There was a strong apprehension that the CEO, Jawhar Sircar, was in favour of ushering in the change as soon as possible. As reported by *The Hindu* on April 30, the policy shift had invited criticism from part-time Board member and former media advisor in the Vajpayee government, Ashok Tandon. He had written to the Chairman questioning not only the wisdom behind the sudden change, but also the treatment meted out to producers. "I have not become a member to concur with your arbitrary decision of first selecting programmes and then putting them in cold storage," he had written.

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