

a face in the crowd

She has dared to be different in a staid world. Usha Kini, a producer on DD Bangalore, firmly believes that television can make a difference to our lives

THE world continues to agonise over television's power to affect viewer behaviour. Keepers of the social conscience constantly agitate over lewd and violent programming that undermines our morals.

Not Usha Kini. This attractive, 37-year-old television producer simply does her job. As programme executive in charge of Bangalore Doordarshan's Channel 9, the Kannada satellite channel, her job is to deliver programmes as high in quality as the working environment in Doordarshan will allow. That Kini certainly does. She represents the quiet, hardworking, unrecognised face in the labyrinths of our television networks, thanks to whom we get to see at least some quality programmes.

A thorough professional, Kini is quite aware that DD has risen poorly to the challenge thrown out by the private networks. "There is competition even within our network, between in-house programmes and outside productions," she says. "We need something much more attractive to lure viewers back to our in-house productions."

So what has Kini done about it? A fair amount, actually. As producer of *Bhagini*, a

women's programme in Kannada, she won accolades for it. "I have always believed that television should be interactive," she says. So Kini engineered a probable first for Indian television with *Hello, Sodari* (sister). It was a live phone-in programme on gender issues. A panel of counsellors was kept busy, answering questions on family conflict, domestic violence and personal crises. Calls started coming in days before the programme even went on air, thanks to pre-launch publicity. Kini had struck the right chord. But unfortunately the show was 'temporarily abandoned' due to 'technical problems'.

Not the one to waste time over such hitches, Kini was on to her next project. More Interactive television. On one episode, a dramatisation of a common family crisis. On the next, a viewer response to the cliffhanger ending. *Sukanya* was the all-too-familiar story of a daughter-in-law harassed for dowry, whose parents' rescue attempt is much too late. *Avala Tirpu* (Her Decision) was about a young ambitious girl, married off at a very young age and her subsequent mental breakdown. After a successful spell of psychiatric care, she is left at the crossroads: should she go back to her parents, who got her into this situation, in the first place or should she go to her husband who has agreed to give her one 'last chance'?

The response was astounding. Thousands of letters filled up Kini's office as viewers sent in their opinions. Most of the response was from out of

Bangalore. The consensus was clear. In the case of *Sukanya*, viewers felt that the girl's parents should have intervened earlier. In *Avala Tirpu* they were unanimous in their view that the young girl should set up an independent life.

Naturally, Kini was delighted. "I feel sorry we don't take viewer response even more into account in our programming," she says. There is a large, disenfranchised viewership out there in the void, waiting to be heard.

Three cheers for Kini who is trying to make these voices heard. Who knows maybe, someday soon, thanks to television programmes such as these, we'll have fewer dowry-death headlines screaming at us. ●

—ROHINI NILEKANI



Usha Kini: making a difference