



Barve: couldn't take any more



Cameraman Arasu: fighting a reluctant management

DOORDARSHAN STRIKE

# Chaos At The Kendra

**B**OMBAY Doordarshan, that bureaucratic monolith, has now been in existence for just over eight years. Almost unremarked upon by the press so far for its gross ineptitude and mismanagement, it suddenly became the focus of attention early this month. The Doordarshan Programme Staff Union (Dpsu) announced their decision to begin a massive strike to express their various grievances.

Last month, Bhakti Barve, a popular stage and television artiste hit the headlines by handing in her resignation to Station Director, Bombay Doordarshan—Arun Shroff. Barve quit out of pique at the necessity of endorsing her contract with Doordarshan, "Every three months, then every month, and recently, every fifteen days," as she put it. "It was like the sword of Damocles ever hanging over my head," she complained.

**Contract Assured:** Two Sundays later viewers were surprised to see her familiar face back on the all-too-familiar *Saptahiki*. Later it was discovered that the unbelievable had hap-

pened. Barve had received a call from the newly appointed Additional Director General (ADG) for Doordarshan India—Kamleshwar, erstwhile editor of *Dharmayug*, script writer, host of *Parikrama* and the president of the Avami Rang Manch. He pressed her to reconsider her decision and offered her a one-year contract on a senior grade immediately. He also assured her of a long-term contract. Taking him at his word, Barve went back on the air, treating it at best as a temporary reprieve.

However, her resignation and subsequent rejoining served a purpose. It brought into limelight the fate of 96 other 'casual' programme staff artistes, who were also required to renew their contracts at uncomfortably frequent intervals. Since they were employed on a programme-to-programme basis, they were excluded from all the facilities that a regular government servant would be eligible for, like provident fund, medical benefits, and even official leave. An estimated 30 per cent of the staff from gatemen to production

assistants were hired on these terms with just a fragile thread to separate them from unemployment.

While this issue was being brought to public notice, other matters were brewing in the restless environs of Doordarshan.

After many years of pitting against a faceless management with unquestioned powers, the Dpsu, along with the All-India Radio Engineers and Employees Association, decided to bring matters to a head. They went on indefinite relay hunger strike from November 3.

**Thoughtful Agitation:** "The decision to go on a strike was not sudden," said R. Arasu, cameraman and secretary of the Union. "Last time our strike, scheduled for August 2 was pre-empted by the visit of the Minister of Information and Broadcasting, V.P. Sathe, to whom we explained our stand. He had then promised to look into the matter immediately. We waited two months—nothing happened. Then we took action." To avoid any inconvenience, the agitators numbering 475, took turns at going on duty. "Fifty of us, including women, took part in the 24 hour relay hunger strike. The rest of us were about our work wearing black badge



said Arasu. "We did not want the work to suffer," explained B.K. Giri, active participant in the agitation, and producer of *Parikrama*, *Bazm-e-Quarwali*, and *Aap Ka Swasthya*.

Paradoxically, the three-and-a-half days that the strike lasted were the rare days on which the Doordarshan Kendra seemed unusually alive. Groups of protestors were talking, holding discussions and shouting slogans near the gates.

There was a very discernible determination about the place, and in fact, serious negotiations were going on with Kamleshwar, who had rushed down from Delhi a day earlier than scheduled for his *Parikrama* recording. Much to his surprise he was confronted by the protesting groups.

**Wage Discrepancy:** The producers were upset about their salary scales. Pointing to a chart he had drawn, which showed the inequity in the salary increments of producers as compared to programme executives and others, Giri said, "It is the producers who do the real work and they get less as basic pay." Kunwar Sinha, producer of *Vibrations* and other programmes, concurred with Giri. "I probably have more experience than most of the others here," he said, (Sinha was at the BBC before he joined Doordarshan) "and yet I am paid the same amount as a fresh graduate of some communications college." Next to complain were the casual staff artistes who, very legitimately, wished to be made permanent. "According to labour law statutes, anyone working 240 days is eligible for permanency," said one unfortunate casual, who preferred to remain unnamed. "Many of the assistants have completed upto five years," confirmed Arasu. "It is nothing but exploitation," he continued.

Cameramen and other technicians were screaming that the equipment they use—which is second hand and donated by the Germans eight years ago—be replaced

Yet others wanted the Accounts and Administration Department,



Kamleshwar: a sympathetic ear

which had been moved out earlier to a building near Worli Sea Face, to be shifted back to its original premises. "Otherwise, the producers and other permanents had to go all the way over sometimes to collect their paychecks," explained Usha, a production assistant. The Union also felt the necessity of setting up a commission of five to look into the discrepancies in that department, and the immediate clearing up of arrears on all travel allowance bills, some of which, as Giri and Arasu confirmed, date back to two years.

**Top-heavy Bureau:** And so the list went on, endlessly. Among the major demands was the restructuring of the entire staff pattern, which right now resembles a top-heavy bureau,

with better promotion channels for the demoralised staff. "My assistants have no hopes of improving their lot, otherwise," says set designer Amrit Pal.

For three days, Kamleshwar lent a sympathetic ear to the strikers. And it was only after obtaining the green signal from the Deputy Minister of Information and Broadcasting, which is the overlord of All India Radio and Doordarshan, that he went into action. He asked the Union to give him a grace period of just four weeks to fulfil the more urgent of their demands. As for the long-term proposals, he promised to place them before the big-shots at Delhi.

On this assurance, the strikers postponed what they refer to as the second phase of the protest to December 10. "If I can't get things moving by then, I myself will come and join you, with a black badge," smiled Kamleshwar.

**Conditional Normalcy:** This strong dose of reassurance seems to have paid off. Work has returned to normal at the TV Centre. Meanwhile, the issues that cannot be settled within the specified month, like that of the promotion channels, have been taken up at the ministry level. In fact, it has been agreed that a three-member delegation will be sent to Delhi from Bombay, to jointly meet the minister and secretary of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, as well as the Director General of Doordarshan, and seek an immediate redressal of their problems. With news of these improvements in working conditions in the air, Doordarshan seems to wear a sense of anticipation these days. Kamleshwar, always a champion of the underdog, has emerged as the industry's hero. However, the militancy of the strike is still fresh in the memory of staff and management alike. "We have heard these assurances before," is all that Sinha is willing to say. But it is the first time that a protest on this scale has been launched at the Mumbai Doordarshan Kendra. And, heady with the apparent success of their venture, the agitators are all set to take similar, if not sterner measures, if the time accorded to Kamleshwar runs out.

—Rohini Soman