

Writer-director **Rajan Shahi**, who helmed popular shows like *Jassi Jaisi Koi Nahin* and *Kareena Kareena*, took a major risk two years ago when he turned producer. But the effort paid off and today he is known as the man behind *Sapna Babul Ka... Bidaai* and *Yeh Rishta Kya Kehlata Hain* which are rocking the charts



# Days of faith

**H**e is a maker with possibly the highest strike rate in recent times. His first two shows *Sapna Babul Ka... Bidaai* and *Yeh Rishta Kya Kehlata Hain*, as a producer were instant hits and have been maintaining their top positions on Star Plus for over two years. His latest *Chhaya Chhaya Bano Meri Pindi* against the popular *Baahubali* was not rocking the charts but it is still early days. His *Sapna Babul Ka... Bidaai* on Colors had an average run and lasted a year. But Rajan Shahi, the director-turned-producer says, "I don't expect all my shows to be hits or garner high TRPs but I am proud of them."

Rajan knows what he is talking about. Having been a part of the TV industry for 18 years, Rajan has had his share of ups and downs. He has seen great highs and even greater lows. If the success of *Jassi Jaisi Koi Nahin*, which he directed brought him laurels, his reluctance to do dailies put him out of business.

A Delhi boy Rajan, like scores of aspirants landed in Mumbai to try his luck in the industry without a clue of what he wanted to do. It was his maternal grandfather and Dadasabhai Phalke award winner P. Jaishankar who inspired him to be a part of the film industry but he was unable to make any headway and a disheartened Rajan consulted an astrologer who further disillusioned him. Heartbroken, he packed his bags and went back to Delhi to join his family business. His father, however, would hear nothing of it. The very next day he was given marching orders and Rajan was back to square one. This time though he had a plan in mind. He approached Ravi Rai, then a much-sought-after producer-director, and requested to keep him on as his assistant. Ravi brushed him off "with the standard line 'Will get back'". Unfazed, Rajan kept going back with the same request for six months. "Finally I got a job at Ulka Advertising, but before taking it up I wanted to meet Ravi," informs Rajan. It was on the sets of *Dehkan*, a serial Ravi was directing, that Rajan confronted Ravi and vented out his feelings. "I told him I was taking up the job only because he wasn't giving me a chance," recalls Rajan. What transpired later could be a scene straight out of a movie.

Rajan was waiting for a bus when he felt thirsty. Since the set was nearby he went back to have a glass of water. Ravi, who was directing a shot, spotted him and immediately called out to him. "He told me he wanted me to join him as his assistant pronto," smiles Rajan. Out went his advertising job and Rajan ended up assisting Ravi for a good six years. Since Ravi was a writer-director-producer all rolled into one, Rajan learnt the ropes of every department. "I even did errands as a runner boy and a production boy," laughs Rajan, giving the entire credit for his schooling to his mentor Ravi.

However, just when Rajan got ready to branch out on his own ("I am probably the only one to have remained as an assistant for so long"), the TV industry was undergoing a transition and weeklies were slowly being phased out. But Rajan did direct some weekly serials like *Himmat*, *Panchang*, episodes of *Rishta* on Zee and *Dil Hai Ke Manto Nahin* on Sony. His big break came with the path-breaking *Sory* serial *Jassi Jaisi Koi Nahin*. "Dailies became the order of the day but I was used to sitting on the script, editing and music and



Yeh Rishta Kya Kehlata Hai



## FACT FILE

- Hailing from Delhi, Rajan Shahi came to Mumbai 18 years ago
- His maternal grandfather is Dadasabhai Phalke award winner P. Jaishankar
- Rajan assisted Ravi Rai for six years
- He directed popular serials like *Kareena Kareena*, *Jassi Jaisi Koi Nahin* and *Saas Pehle*

then delivering the final product, which is why I was reluctant to do-daily soaps, that resembled a factory set-up," recalls Rajan, who for a brief time left TV to concentrate on film projects. However, after a year-and-a-half during which the film he was working on didn't take off, he decided to embrace dailies. "I had to earn my bread and butter and could not overlook this changing medium," philosophises Rajan, who

returned to the genre with full vengeance. Shooting 30 days a month, Rajan added himself to the environment. He directed the popular serial *Kareena Kareena* and the channel-driver *Sir Zee*, Saas Pehle, among others. The phase of serial-director had come in and Rajan was sought-after for setting up shows that had failed to generate interest. *Ghar Ki Lazmi Betiyon* and *Manjha* were some of the shows that got the Rajan touch. "I always went beyond the script, a trait that I carried over from my weekly shows days, which impressed the producers," says Rajan.

During this period he had many one-to-one interactions with the producers and Vivek Bhat, the then Creative Head of Star Plus, gave him an opportunity to produce a show. It was also the time when Rajan had started thinking along those lines because "there used to a huge disparity between the production and the creatives." It was a turning point in Rajan's life as he had given up a good income but started working for a small and turn producer. "I didn't even have a huge bank-balance but I decided to take the plunge," says Rajan, whose first show under his banner Director's Kutava *Bidaai*. This serial came in at a time when over-the-top, local saas-bahu soaps had outlived itself and viewers were looking for a change. *Bidaai* with its simple presentation and story was welcomed enthusiastically and within a year, Star Plus got Rajan to do another show *Yeh Rishta Kya Kehlata Hai*. Even this show clicked, racing to the numero uno slot replacing his own *Bidaai*. "The story is the USP of the serial. It has no negative characters, the costumes are authentic and the sets have a grandeur," explains Rajan.

The success of these two shows brought Rajan laurels and comparisons with TV dyno *Kapoor*. "There can be no comparison. The kind of vision, command and control *Kapoor* has over the medium is something which nobody had or will be able to get. She is an institution and I have a lot to learn from her," says the producer-director. What about allegations that he borrows heavily from *Rajshri Films*? "I am very clear that I want to make clean entertainers that propagate positivity in terms of values, relationships etc. It is important in today's world where language has become crass and people are abusing each other. The *Rajshri Films* are an inspiration for their food-good entertainers and I am a big fan of Soorajji (Rajshree)," admits Rajan, unabashedly.

Closely, Rajan is riding on a high but the producer-writer is aware that the phase will not last. "Nothing has come instantly to me and I know things will not always be the same. Many people have advised me to cash in on my success but I believe in quality over quantity. Even today, I am easily accessible to every one in my team and the channel's executive producer as I was in my initial days," says Rajan. Recently Sara Khan who plays Sadhna in *Bidaai*, threw some tantrums as a result of which she was out of the serial. Rajan, however, refuses to comment. Instead, he smiles out his mantra: "Keep your head on your shoulder and earn good-will". One might think that with his shows rocking the charts, the writer-director-producer is resting on his laurels. But after doing family-oriented shows, he is now keen to explore a new genre and thereby re-invent himself. He says, "I want to come up with a show that will have aggression and conflict. I can create and watch if Rajan strikes gold with this new venture too."

■ Chaya Unnikrishnan  
chaya.unnikrishnan@expressindia.com