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UNUSUAL CAREER

Crowdsourcing, tv style

Sharmila Ganesan Ram | June 16, 2012

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It pays to be part of the 'spontaneous' audience at a reality TV show.

A year ago, had he been asked to laugh for no reason in particular, Vishal Suvarna would have found it embarrassing. Today, it's all in a day's work. Suvarna's unusual career started when he was a final-year science student. He signed up to be one of the several faces that reality show cameras like to fleetingly acknowledge. The attraction was the Rs 500 per shift it fetched

him in 2010 and a possible future as a production manager. However, the recent boom of talent and chat shows has ensured that clapping and laughing for the camera is now a source of livelihood for Suvarna.

Among his fellow rent-a-laughers are a few middle-aged housewives and retired men but most are youngsters who cannot otherwise afford to pay their bills without this 'career' in hand.

Crowd gathering for TV shows is the job of various 'co-ordinators' and 'suppliers' to whom the production houses outsource their requirements. If it's a talk show, they ask for middleaged "aunties" and "uncles" who are otherwise ignored by most channels.

For most shows, jeans-clad youngsters are preferred. Girls who are too dark are made to sit in the back row and the front row generally consists of aspiring models who work only on a nine-hour shift basis.

Says Pappu Lekhraj, a popular name in this business of crowd sourcing : "A good-looking crowd comes at a premium. "

A job that only entails laughing, clapping and dancing might sound easy but it involves a lot of uncertainty and some discomfort - unpredictable timings, endless waiting and a strictly monitored work environment. Phones have to be switched off, meals postponed and the bladder controlled for hours. Lunch is the only assured meal and it could vary from a packed sandwich to a plate of rice.

"Sometimes they ask us to dance when we are dead tired and hungry, " says Meeta, who is still hurt about the fact that she was once rejected for being "too short".

Contrary to what is seen on television, audience reactions are tightly monitored and directed. When the audience is asked to guffaw, it has to, even if it means tickling your neighbour to get the required effect.

Suvarna has been witnessing the circus of reality shows from the ringside too long to watch its edited version on TV. "It's all acting, " says the veteran audience member who says that he has seen regulars in the paid crowd circuit appear on reality shows with fake problems.

At most new shows, few in the audience know what to expect. At the beginning of one serious political talkshow this reporter attended, one of the members was heard asking his co-ordinator : "Aunty, who is going to sing?"

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