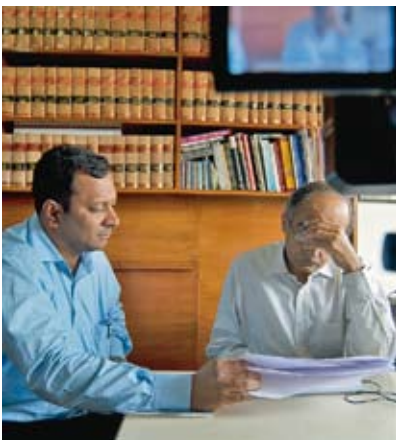




Sunil Prabhu:
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SPARKING THE DEBATE

He has little interest in accolades, yet Sunil Prabhu is one of India's leading journalists. In the thick of reporting on the country's anti-corruption campaign, he took time out to tell **Ann Morgan** about his ambition to cover the stories that really matter



Sunil Prabhu is under pressure when we speak on the phone. India is in the midst of its anti-corruption campaign, with many government officials standing accused of bribetaking, vote-buying and other offences, and he is poised to report the latest news from parliament. He could be called away at any time.

Luckily, Prabhu is used to coping with challenging situations. His 17-year career in TV journalism has seen him tackling many of South Asia's biggest news stories. Now, as Associate Editor of Political Affairs for the 24-hour news channel New Delhi TV (NDTV), a role he recently took on after several years as the station's Chief Political Correspondent, he is one of India's leading journalists – not that he has much interest in fame or accolades.

'I don't believe in glamour,' he says. 'I dislike the phrase "high profile". When you love something you're doing, you grow with it. That's how I grew.'

Prabhu's involvement in journalism began by chance a few months after he graduated from Jawaharlal Nehru University with an MA in Modern Indian History in 1995. Having started work for telecoms company Hutchison Max, he quickly realised the corporate world was not for him. Then an advertisement caught his eye.

'There was a board outside TVI [Business India's television channel],' he says. 'It said: "Trespassers will be hired" instead of "Trespassers will be prosecuted". I was one of those trespassers who came into the television channel, and they decided to hire me.'

It was a great time to be getting into broadcasting. With the dawn of independent television in India in the early 1990s, the number of channels was exploding and there were many opportunities for bright young graduates who weren't afraid of trespassing.

As the influence of state television declined, the nature of reporting was changing too. 'It was amazing,' says Prabhu. 'It was a different life altogether because politicians were not used to being asked questions. They were used to saying something and not being held to their word. For the first time, we were seeing incidents of people speaking on camera and being caught out.'

'It completely transformed the situation,' he continues. 'What your story said and what you reported was very important in terms of opinion-making. It brought a great sense of accountability to governance.'

Exposing wrongdoing

Prabhu's early stories centred around the long-term impact of the sweeping economic reforms announced in 1991 by then-Finance Minister Manmohan Singh. The interviews he did were quoted in parliamentary debates and it wasn't long before the young reporter was covering events across the nation and beyond, with the pivotal 1996 elections, the conflict in Jaffna and the Kargil War all featuring in his work.

Moving to NDTV before it separated from Star TV, Prabhu climbed the ranks to become Chief Political Correspondent. He continued to make it his mission to hold decision-makers to account and expose wrongdoing.

His most memorable story broke in 2008 after he conducted an investigation into corruption in the judiciary in Ghaziabad, in spite of opposition from some of the most senior figures in India's legal system. The resultant inquiry led to the sacking of numerous judicial officers and magistrates and new regulations designed to prevent judges from abusing their powers.

As ever, Prabhu prefers to focus on the outcome of his work rather than on any glory it might bring to him. 'It was just good journalism,' he says. 'When you have to investigate and go after someone and you feel you can help clean up the system in a country like ours, which is a huge democracy, it means a lot.'

The desire to continue tackling the big stories and exploring the possibilities of accountability was what prompted Prabhu to apply for a Chevening Gurukul Leadership Scholarship in 2010. Funded by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and administered by the British Council, these awards pay for 12 high-flying Indian professionals to study an intensive management and leadership course at the London School of Economics (LSE) every year. »



FARUQ AMMAR ABBAS, ALAMY



“ THE FOCUS IS TO SEE THAT THERE IS NO DUMBING DOWN OF NEWS ... NOT TO ALLOW NEWS TO BECOME YELLOW JOURNALISM ”

For Prabhu, the award presented an opportunity to take stock and broaden his horizons mid-way through his career.

‘It was not so much about the course itself,’ he says. ‘It was about coming to the UK, being part of LSE and exchanging ideas with people from across the world. It was an opportunity to interact with them and listen to some of the best speakers.’

On arrival in the UK, Prabhu found that the time away from home offered him many other things too.

‘The entire programme was an education,’ he says. ‘For a person from a developing country coming to the UK for the first time, the experience was overwhelming. I have been in the best colleges and universities in India, but we have a lot to learn from how the UK has evolved as a nation state in terms of education. It’s an eye-opener.’

Prabhu immersed himself in UK society and media. Finding himself in London at the time of the student demonstrations, he was fascinated to see how British journalists covered the events and the role of social media in breaking running stories.

‘I went through the English newspapers and looked at the way they handled events,’ he said. ‘The world is going through

an information revolution with things like Twitter creating network journalism. For me, it’s given a completely new meaning to journalism.’

The 12 weeks of intensive discussion, study and observation made Prabhu more determined than ever to champion good reporting. Since returning to NDTV and assuming a new level of responsibility as Associate Editor of Political Affairs, he has made it his mission to maintain the channel’s reputation for hard news.

‘The focus is to see that there is no dumbing down of news,’ he says. ‘That’s the most important challenge: not to allow news to become yellow journalism. It is about keeping the focus on important issues of governance and on holding people accountable for what they do.’

Putting such principles into practice, Prabhu has championed big stories such as the cabinet’s decisions on the 2011 caste census and the development of regulations for the appointment of judges, both of which NDTV has covered extensively.

Pushing the boundaries

The story closest to his heart, however, is the renewed discussion about the death penalty. This erupted after he broke the news that President Pratibha Patil had upheld the sentences of two prisoners on death row in May 2011, clearing the way for India’s first executions in seven years. For Prabhu, the news was an opportunity to open up public debate.

‘India is one of the few countries that has not banned the death penalty,’ he says. ‘I am trying to build up the debate about whether the death penalty is still valid today or not. I am attempting in my small way to sensitise the nation.’

He maintains that such large-scale ambitions owe a lot to his mid-career sabbatical and the time he spent as a Chevening Gurukul Scholar in the UK. ‘It has had a huge impact on my work,’ he says. ‘It’s given me new meaning and an entirely new focus in terms of how I should approach events and tackle situations. It helped me realise there is a different world.’

‘I used to be a 24/7 general news reporter,’ he adds, preparing to get back to the anti-corruption debate. ‘I’ve now decided to focus on larger, more meaningful stories.’ ■