After 11 years, two channels, five seasons, 510 episodes and 886 participants, Kaun Banega Crorepati (KBC) has come a long way.

In a world where interest levels yo-yo wildly, KBC has effortlessly managed to keep viewers and advertisers glued to their seats.

The most surprising aspect of the Indian version of the popular international game show Who Wants to be a Millionaire? is that its popularity shows no signs of waning (see chart). Take the latest season. While it was on, KBC 5 garnered an average TVR of 4.77, catapulting it to the No. 2 slot in the rankings. For a non-fiction show, it was a great performance. Between mid-August and mid-November, when KBC was aired, the most-viewed show on Indian television was Saathiya Saath Nibhana on STAR Plus, which claimed an average TVR of 5.46. Third on the list was Baalika Vadhu with a TVR of 4.31.

When KBC was introduced in 2000, there were innovations galore. Just the fact that a mega star like Amitabh Bachchan was in the living rooms of people almost every night—talking to them, talking with them—was thrilling enough for many. A jackpot of ₹1 crore for a quiz show was unheard of. That, plus the fact that anyone could be up there engaging with the superstar, kept interest levels stratospheric. KBC and Bachchan swept through Season 1 with consummate ease.

However, as time passed, the novelty wore off. Bachchan’s rapport with each participant went up several notches. KBC increased its focus on small towns. People on the show confessed to having tried getting into KBC, sometimes waiting for as long as 10 years.

After 11 years, two channels, five seasons, 510 participants, and 886 episodes, KBC keeps raising the bar.

KBC’s fifth edition broke all its previous records. As the dust settles, we analyse what has made the show such a successful one, season after season.

By Prajjal Saha and Anindita Sarkar

THE
MILLION-DOLLAR
QUESTION

With a format that was just a template, with one host (barring one season when Shah Rukh Khan was in charge), the excitement of non-quizzers answering difficult questions kept the momentum going. The beauty of the show was that the viewer too could get into the act, unlike a song-and-dance-based reality show where it was just the participant on stage who got the chance to perform. Another factor working in favour of KBC was its simple structure—from the selection procedure to the format (15 questions, four life-lines and the flexibility to quit anytime). Other popular quiz shows such as Mastermind were serious and intimidating. KBC stood out for its universality where everyone had a chance.

KBC is not about testing excellence. Questions, say the producers, are set according to a contestant’s level of intelligence and background. The answers to these questions are based on the participant’s experience and judgement, not just knowledge. As Siddhartha Basu, chairman and managing director, Big Synergy, the production company behind KBC, says, “The setting of quiz questions is art more than science.”

The show is also a great leveller where Bachchan—the megastar—and the participant—a rank commoner—interact with each other at the same level. Much of the credit for that goes to Bachchan, who takes that extra effort to make the participant feel comfortable and at ease. “A king-subject relationship would have never worked for the show,” says a senior media executive.

The emotional connect between the host and the participant keeps the show alive. In a fiction show, the audience gauges the chemistry between the two main leads of the show. If the chemistry is feeble, viewer fatigue creeps in.
Says one media veteran, “Hats off to the scripting of the show.” The production house however claims that much of these interactions are spontaneous and that Bachchan proactively acquaints himself with each contestant before zero hour.

THE BACHCHAN FACTOR

KBC is synonymous with Bachchan who has hosted more than 450 of the 510 episodes on show till now. “You cannot bring just any actor to host the show, no matter how famous he may be. He has to be someone who is evolved, mature and well respected. Bachchan fits in the best,” says Sundeep Nagpal, founder-director, Strategem Media, a Mumbai-based media consultancy firm.

It’s hard to separate the show from the showman. NP Singh, COO of Multi Screen Media (MSM), Sony’s parent company that owns the licence for KBC in India, admits that the channel decided to bring back the show only after Bachchan agreed to host it again. The eloquence, the drama and the gravitas that Bachchan brings to the table is unparalleled. Interestingly, India is the only country where Who Wants to be a Millionaire? has a celebrity host.

There are others who believe that it’s not just the host who creates the magic. It, they point out, is the format that does the trick and helps the host bring out the best in the participant. This implies that any celebrity who commands the same level of respect, or exudes the same kind of warmth, can also play the host. Going by Singh’s reasoning, the channel did not want to find that out the hard way.

PEOPLE LIKE US

When Sony decided to get KBC back on to television screens in 2010, it needed to give it a distinct positioning and came up with the idea of Koi Bhi Sawal Chhota Nahin Hota (No question is irrelevant). In Season 5, that was developed further. Sony had learnt by then that the human-interest angle would work well. The idea was to find the common man or woman from smaller towns, who was normally off the media radar.

The idea came from KBC 4, in which the jackpot winner was Rahat Tasleem, a woman from Girdigh, a small town in Jharkhand. “That was a huge eye-opener. We realised that India went beyond the metros. So, we decided to tap into that market,” says Sneha Rajani, senior executive vice-president and business head, SET.

In the fifth season, the show came up with the concept of Koi bhi insaan chhota nahin hota, which meant that every person is special. Their stories compelled small town audiences to connect deeper with occupant of the hot seat, episode after episode. Khurda in Odisha met Begusarai in Bihar on television screens at 20:30 hours every night and hit it off with the rest of India spectacularly.

And, to bring this connect, there were changes everywhere—from the selection process to the promos and the packaging. Little video vignettes were created on each hot seat participant. “Yes, there were a variety of stories within them. Some were sad, some moving, some funny. This was the big rejuvenator for the show in its fifth season,” says Basu of Big Synergy.

The usually reserved Bachchan opened up in Season 5 and made an extra effort to reach out to the contestants. Internationally too, the trend of capturing stories became a part of the game, but it is not as elaborate as in India. The strategy was inspired by the success of the movie Shudhog Millionaire, adapted from the plot of Vikas Swarup’s book Q&A, which was based on the KBC phenomenon.

“The promos were so well-packaged that just one or two exposures were enough for audiences to realise that it is not just a quiz show, but an interesting new story that is going to unfold every day,” says Jehil Thakkar, executive director, KPMG India.

IT’S THE THRILL...

In its fifth season, KBC raised the prize money to ₹5 crore. It wasn’t just the prize money that made the difference. Not everyone would recklessly play for ₹1 crore—or ₹5 crore—especially when there was an option to quit the game.

What mattered more was the thrill and the excitement that a contestant derived en route to whatever prize money he won. That thrill translated itself to the viewers—many took out time to watch Sushil Kumar win ₹5 crore.

The audience’s attachment with KBC became even more heightened because of the gap...
between seasons.

It could have been a different story if the show was aired consecutively for 11 years since its debut. The television market had evolved through the decade. In 2000-01, India had an estimated 45 million cable and satellite households which had access to such content. Today, that has grown to 116 million households, including the 30 million DTH homes. That translates into 70 million new homes—and many more viewers—that came into existence after KBC’s first episode aired in 2001.

**...AND THE NEWNESS**

KBC 5 tried to disrupt and bring in freshness with several new elements. For instance, the show in the current season was moved back to the weekday slot. It became a 90-minute show instead of the usual 60 minutes. The weekday slot meant that KBC 5 had to disrupt the normal television diet of regular viewers.

With the 90-minute format KBC competed with three, and not two fiction shows. The risk paid off. The show gathered incremental viewership. In metros, family viewing begins around 8.30 PM or 9 PM. For non-metros it starts much earlier. The longer duration increased viewership both in the metros and smaller cities.

**THE MONEY**

Advertisers primarily look at two things before investing—reach and certainty. KBC had both in plenty. As a result, there was hardly any problem recouping the ₹1 crore that went into producing each episode. Consider this: the cumulative reach of the show grew from 26.7 million in 2000 to 116.7 million in 2011.

Media experts believe that the fifth edition of KBC generated 40-50 per cent more revenue for the channel compared to KBC 4. Of the ₹200-odd crore revenue generated by KBC 5, ₹95 crore came from eight sponsors.

Sony used a clever mix of the extended timings, break patterns and drama to build stickiness among viewers. The channel also made it a point not to disrupt the flow of the contestant’s thought process. The timer stopped ticking—as the rounds progressed—depending upon the comfort level of the contestant. Ad breaks just before the answers made sure that the viewer came back.

**WHAT NEXT?**

KBC has managed to innovate with every season. New themes, new positioning and bigger prize money went into making it the show that drew viewers and contestants in droves. The common man’s story worked like a charm for it this time. Will KBC stick to that or come up with another surprise in the next season? Up until now, KBC has worked because it has made reality very real. “There is an assumption that television is consumed with a tabloid mindset. But I think that if you can connect with the audience through the mind, heart and soul, it will work,” concludes Basu. It has worked very well for over a decade. There’s no reason to suspect that it will not continue to do so.

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**THE ORIGIN**

Kaun Banega Crorepati is the Indian adaptation of the international show *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* which originated in the United Kingdom on September 4, 1998. The format was devised by David Briggs, Steven Knight and Mike Whitehill. The original working title for the show was *Cash Mountain*.

In 2006, Celador the original owners sold the worldwide rights to a Dutch company 2waytraffic which was subsequently acquired by Sony Pictures Entertainment for £137.5 million.

The show has been aired in 81 different versions which includes Indian languages such as Tamil, Bengali, Bhojpuri and Hindi. There are 37 versions currently on air worldwide.