

Bring back the Children on TV

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I don't watch a lot of television, not because I have more creative pursuits to enhance my intellect, it's just that I don't have the time. Ok the truth is I can't get control of the remote. Yet on the rare occasions when I am 'allowed' to channel surf, I am quite appalled at many of the shows that are apparently 'for children'. The Indian channels are full of contests where ten year old girls are dressed up and made up like Bollywood actresses, gyrating to some hit Hindi song, making all those suggestive moves in front of an ecstatic audience and approving panel of judges. Then there are singing contests where again, little boys and girls sing out their hearts some raunchy Hindi number against the backdrop of a gaudy, glittery stage. Horror of horrors I flip to our own channels and what do I see-- identical shows with the same ridiculous dance sequences performed by pre-teens, wearing layers of makeup and making moves that would put any Dhaliwood film extra to shame. *Where are the children*, I begin to wonder. *Oh no! They have been replaced by mini-adults.*

It may seem strange but I was once a TV junkie, glued to the screen, as long as school life and parental indulgence would allow. Those were the days when it was BTV and just BTV. Now it may seem a little pathetic that a child should have no other option but to watch the dull, drab screen of national television (at least we had colour) but you may be surprised to know that there were quite a few programmes especially catered to children.

The most popular show that kept kids busy practically all year round was the Notun Kuri contest which had every category of creative talent from singing (Nazrul Geeti, Rabindra Sangeet, Classical music, Patriotic songs, Folk, Children's songs etc) to dancing (classical and traditional), poetry recitation (not romantic ballads but poems for children), drama, music and so on. I never participated in any contest but it was one of the most exciting and entertaining times of the year when the contests would be aired and later the winners announced.

There were also regular children's dramas and drama serials like 'Roj Roj' which was possibly the most popular children's serial. Ferdousi Rahman's regular *Esho Gaan Shikhi* was another crowd puller. Few of us can forget her charming style of teaching songs and the antics of Mithu and Monty, the puppets that never failed to evoke peels of delighted laughter. The songs too were catchy and written for children *Jadur Pencil* (about a magical pencil that turned everything it drew, real), *Tomra Bolo* (a song about buzzing mosquitoes interrupting homework) and *Jhor Elo Elo Jhor* (about mangoes falling off the trees when a storm comes).

There were regular puppet shows and art shows for children. Then came the Meena cartoons which were an instant hit because of the innovative themes and localised content. Quiz competitions, inter-school debates and cultural shows by students from different schools were also regularly aired.

In between all this were the children's movies from around the world. I particularly remember the enchanting Russian films that took one into a fantasy world of beautiful princesses, gorgeous lands and magical kingdoms. There were the daily 25 minutes of cartoon shows and the regular English serials such as 'Girl from Tomorrow' or 'Tales from Narnia'.

Nowadays the only children's show worth watching on television is Sisimpur that has done wonders by designing the characters and themes in a Bangladeshi context while retaining the fun and sophistication of the original Sesame Street model. But Sisimpur is only shown on BTV and for only a short time. What about all the other channels? Our kids are hooked on Cartoon network, Nickelodeon and Disney Channel which, although gives tremendous pleasure to young people and (and relief to the harassed parents), do not show anything that will remind kids of their cultural identity.

Obviously this huge void needs to be filled. There are enough talented people in the entertainment industry but for some reason no one is interested in creating shows exclusively for children, not shows that ape the vulgar Bollywood-type shows on Indian channels, but original shows that will really get kids interested. Children's drama, puppet shows, talk shows for adolescents, fun educational shows like Sisimpur, cartoons like Meena, comedy shows, programmes like Ekushey Television's Mukto Khobor- this is the kind of wholesome entertainment children need. The media, around the world, seems to be all bent on forcing children into adulthood, to wear grownup clothes, talk like them, behave like them and even think like them. It's about time we let children be just what they are supposed to be, children. ■