

Friday. A lazy day; the entire family is home, relaxing. My three-ish year old self decides to place herself comfortably on Janu's lap (our house-help of the time) on the floor while my mother sits on a chair reading the newspaper. The early noon sun pouring into the room; a light breeze tickling the curtains and a fly or two hovering over the half eaten loafs of bread on the dining table. The little television comprising of a single channel is placed in the middle of the room and a re-run episode of *Auyomoy* is being broadcast.

I often remember BTV through rose-tinted lenses. As the only child of two working parents, a good deal of my time in the day is spent watching random ads and waiting for the children's hour on BTV. Every afternoon, I used to sit down to watch Captain Planet or Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles—my little escape from the mundane flow of my days.

From compelling drama serials, to an hour or two dedicated to children every day, BTV, in my opinion, did a surprisingly sophisticated job of catering to its public with whatever limited resources it had, well before the advent of cable TV. Other than broadcasting some of the best stories of our local talents, it also curated reputed shows hand-picked from all over the world, giving people an outlet to see what lay beyond our borders. Which one of us did not marvel at the use of MacGyver's creative methods of using materials from his surroundings to get out of tight

and I'm making friends in the States and having detailed intellectual conversations about the almost ludicrous brilliance of Lynchian characters and absurd story logic, solely based on the memories of my BTV days and the initial emotions these shows triggered in me.

BTV also shaped my tastes in the arts and ignited my interests in history and mythology. To deny it would be an abomination of logic. I don't think I'm just speaking for myself when I say that the dubbed Tipu Sultan series kindled a curiosity and love for the Mughal

influences; what about the influences of our own stories? I cannot resist the temptation of talking about a few trailblazing shows of the time. The first name that comes to mind is—you guessed it—Humayun Ahmed. My father used to affectionately call me Kaan-Kata-Ramzan (yes, my family can be strange). When Baker Bhai (played by Asadduzzaman Nur) was executed in the last episode of *Kothhao Keu Nei*, people came onto the streets to protest, demanding a change in the plot. Ahmed, of course, stayed true to his story. A

for kids and teens—*NotunKuri*. A wide array of budding talents took part in the nationwide competition. Back then we didn't need to draw inspiration from India or the West, we tried to develop our own style and format of conducting performances and competitions that successfully reached the hearts of our population.

Another very originally designed program—one loved by kids and adults alike—was none other than the brain-child of Hanif Sanket, the magazine show *Ittyadi*. It consisted of a series of segments that beautifully articulated the many layers of idiosyncrasies of our lives. Rich in humour and satire and propelled by a drive to inform and entertain, Sanket brought up important social and cultural issues in such a thoroughly pleasurable way that it was difficult to ignore his message. Some of his well-known segments included Nana Nati (the ruminations and debates of an ever-curious Nati with a perpetually irritable Nana, the dubbed sections of English comedies put in the Bengali context), small story-episodes with a full cast of expats trained to speak and act in Bangla, witty songs speaking about social issues (such as Dhaka Traffic) and special guest appearances from people from various walks of life to illustrate their stories of struggle and passion, etc.

Amongst the other bits of entertainment, we of course had the occasional musical programmes. The stages with their colourful drapery and lights, columns and pillars that were possibly meant to add a sense of drama, with the singers just standing (often very stiffly and without expression) and singing, while the camera caught them from various angles against this



IMAGE COURTESY: SAIQ'A S. CHOWDHURY

TOGETHER WITH BTV

SAIQ'A S. CHOWDHURY



PHOTOS: COURTESY



situations and manipulate circumstances to suit his advantage? Every kid who grew up with MacGyver waited throughout the week for his next appearance. We looked up to him—we wanted to be like him.

I cannot forget the dark and wonderful David Lynch show, *Twin Peaks*. In the years to come, I'd have plenty of recurring nightmares of the Dancing Dwarf from the Cooper's Dream scene, only to become a typical cult follower of David Lynch and an avid listener of Angelo Badalamenti who composed the hauntingly beautiful score for the show. Fast forward into the future

History, giving us an insight of South Asian history and what it meant to be a just ruler standing tall against oppressors.

Alif Laila, with its elaborate costumes and theatrical make up, on the other hand, was every child's lesson on morality and the world wars between good and evil—in addition to being entertaining as hell. Who can forget Malika Tahudi with her poofy hair and stare of evil or Malika Hamira with her deceptive charm trying to plot against the fall of Sindbad? And what kid has not argued with his/her friends about what s/he would do if s/he had a magic lamp? Enough about the positive foreign

similar thing happened when Tuni, a young girl, from his drama *Ei Shob Din Ratri*, died of Lukemia at the end of the series. This is how involved we used to be with our fiction.

This was a time when families all over the country sat together at a certain time of the day, waiting intently to watch what would happen next. We empathised and lived with Humayun's characters. We wept for and loved these living, breathing people of fiction. Such was the power of our entertainment.

While we are on the topic of local talent and entertainment, I must bring up our very own version of a talent show

“dramatic” structure of the stage—to this day remains synonymous with BTV. If you switch on BTV today, the stages look almost the same (except very bright and fused with multi-coloured lighting) and you still see a singer or a set of bauls standing in a line singing their songs with full awareness of being on television. This gives way to a rather psychedelic experience charged with nostalgia! There's something oddly beautiful about knowing that some things don't change and that there will be a place of familiarity that will not be lost.

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MUSINGS

BOOK REVIEW

“Revolutions begin fighting tyranny and end fighting themselves.”

Carlos Fuentes quoting Louis Antoine Saint-Just, the French revolutionary guillotined in the combat between the factions once united against the monarchy

The Underdogs by Mariano Azuela, the first of the novelists of the Mexican Revolution, is a modern epic set at the height of legendary general Pancho Villa's fame and ends two years later, when Villa is suffering heavy blows in the fight between the two factions of revolutionaries—the Conventionists led by Villa and Emiliano Zapata and the Constitutionalists led by Venustiano Carranza and Álvaro Obregón. However, as suggested by the

rural population, remained immobilised and chained by the debt to the *hacienda*. The protagonist and his men are thus subjects from the lower rural classes who had been excluded from the benefits of Díaz's modernisations, the very classes who rose up in the revolution.

However, as with any frank treatment of war, lines blur in *The Underdogs*. Ex-federal soldiers join the revolutionaries, and the heroes become the plunderers and the rapists they once fought, as the mantle of power shifts. As the rebels overpower the *federales*, a newfound freedom is found, one that is completely unbridled and lawless. Thus, in the words of the translator Sergio Waisman, the novel is “replete with ambiguities”. Fuentes also asks in the foreword:

CATHARTIC AND SELF-DESTRUCTIVE

THE MEXICAN REVOLUTION AS PORTRAYED IN THE UNDERDOGS

AMIYA HALDER

title, the setting of the novel is not the battlefields of these famed leaders. It follows Demetrio Macías, the peasant-warrior, and his band of 20-odd rebels, from humble beginnings to periods of intense battles and much glory, and ultimately back to Macías's original point of departure—the darkness of the Mexican Sierra.

The original Spanish title, *Los de abajo*, literally translates to “those from below”. Demetrio and his men are without a doubt from below, in an economic and social sense. Under the 30-year rule of dictator Porfirio Díaz (1876-1910), Mexico had experienced limited economic development. While industrialisation through the investment of foreign capital and modernisation of the transportation system provided some of the necessary constituents of a modern capitalist system, the rural lands and agricultural workers who formed the majority of Mexico's labourers, or peons, remained firmly under the control of the semi-feudal *hacienda* system. By questioning the registered titles of *ejidos*, land farmed communally, Díaz made more land available for the landed gentry. By 1910, over 90 percent of the villages in the central part of the country had lost their lands, while some 30 percent, the majority of the landless



ARTWORK: JOSE CLEMENTE OKOZCO



PENGUIN CLASSICS
MARIANO AZUELA
The Underdogs
A Novel of the Mexican Revolution
Introduction by CARLOS FUENTES

“Is the novel revolutionary—in the way it underscores the poverty and ignorance of Mexico's peasants and lower classes, and the injustices separating their condition from that of the few land-owning elite? Or is it counter-revolutionary, in the ways it reveals the barbarism and banditry of those who fought on both sides of the revolution, thus suggesting that the objectives of the revolutionaries were personal in nature, as opposed to ideological?”

While the readers may come to their own conclusions, it is unimportant to resolve these ambiguities. There is nuance to the havoc. The vandalism and expropriation of property and possessions by the revolutionaries is an unavoidable evil, if not a necessary one. It is cathartic—a destruction of the symbols of the ruling and land-owning class, a liberation from the past power structures.

However, as in the example of the devaluation of a stolen typewriter, from ten pesos to a quarter, and its eventual destruction, these acts paradoxically reflect a lack of appreciation and understanding for the new instruments of power. As Beatrice Berler outlines in her paper, *The Mexican Revolution as Reflected in the Novel*, under Díaz's, schools in the small communities and villages were closed. Knowing that an educated populace is not easily subjugated, he allowed them only in the larger cities for the exclusive use of the wealthy class. Thus, the rebels had been self-destructive and short-sighted, their actions ultimately not useful towards the very re-organisation of the economy that they had been fighting for.

Thus, *The Underdogs* neither focuses heavily on the premise of the revolution nor does it attempt to justify its byproduct. In this way, it is a thoroughly critical account of the underdog, the little guy who does not understand the big picture. Indeed, it is only the self-serving intellectual Luis Cervantes, a physician and self-disparaging stand-in for Azuela himself, who survives the war and thrives in the end. Ending on an ellipsis, Mariano Azuela points out that even if the battle is over, the revolution is far from it. In the words of Saint-Just, it is only “when a people, having become free, establish wise laws, [that] their revolution is complete.” ■



PHOTOS: GABRIEL FIGUEROA