



DESIGN: ORCHID CHAKMA

# The Magic Inside an Idiot Box

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I grew up in an era when the “idiot box” occupied the corner of the drawing room. The rectangular box was captivating people of all ages. When fathers came home from work, they would sit back on the couch sipping on tea as they watched the News at 8 on BTV and children would finish their homework by afternoon and wait for the Genie of Arabian Nights to pop on the television screen.

Weeks would pass with people wondering why *Aaj Robibar* was not being aired on Sundays. I would find joy in the smiling face of “Gaaner Khalamoni” showing up on the TV screen with Monti-Mithu.

The greatest of all artisans of Bangla television I know, whose Midas touch turned it into a magical box, is Humayun Ahmed. My introduction to his work was through *Aaj Robibar*. Friday dinners were moved to an earlier time in our household, so we could all watch the show on time. When there was a power cut during the show, my father had to keep calling the power supply office to ask for updates to appease me.

Konka and Titli were my favourite girls with double braids. The moment they would walk down the stairs of the iconic house lit with incandescent bulbs, my heart would leap with joy. I still laugh out loud thinking about Anis, the thick-spectacled nerd who got soaked in sweat while determining which doodle was more

*hijibiji*. I did not know what a coffin was until I saw Boro Chacha lying inside it. I still remember Moti, who added a new dimension to the series. It was hysterical to watch Boro Chacha squirting ink in the eye of this overly curious guy, who was looking through the keyhole.

The sitcom was so popular during those days, that it was aired later in Hindi on the Indian television channel Star Plus in 2017. After 22 years, the show did not lose its appeal; I even binge-watched the show during the recent lockdown.

You could hardly find any person from our generation who would not eagerly wait for Friday evenings to watch *Alif Laila*. *Alif Laila* is the Bangla-dubbed version of a Hindi TV series which aired previously on Doordarshan. The journey of the thousand nights was like a trip on a magic carpet to a fantasy land with green demons, magical lamps, treasure caves, the curly-haired Kherman, beautiful sorceresses like Malika Hamira or Sofan Isba. There were dances, music, chimes, magic -- everything that would keep the audience mesmerised for half an hour on weekends.

If we were out, I would keep whining to my parents so they would bring us home early and I would not miss the episode. The moment I heard the title song, I would lose myself in the kingdom of fantasy.

Another reason for the immense popularity of BTV among children was the wide variety of local and foreign cartoon shows. *Moner Kotha* by Mustafa Monwar or *Meena*

grew an enthusiastic fan base, as did *Bernie* or *Jumanji*. The character who planted feminism in me for the first time was Meena. She was the one who taught me how to be vocal about gender equity. She was the girl who set an example of female education for many girls of our age.

Besides Meena, there were other cartoon shows that I still cherish. There were times when I used to dream about living in a house like the one shown in *Bananas in Pyjamas*. Sometimes, I used to sink into the idea of becoming a superhero like Captain Planet and save planet earth.

Probably the most popular foreign TV series to be aired in Bangla television is *MacGyver*. The protagonist of the series was the eponymous character, a secret agent who, instead of keeping a firearm, would use his knowledge of science to solve any problem. He carried his safety kit adorned with a Swiss army knife or duct tape to escape. The guy with the golden mullet was the solution to all problems.

*The Adventure of Sinbad* was another popular foreign TV show. Though I was too young to understand the chemistry between Sinbad and Maeve, it was always fun to watch them participating together in their expeditions. I still remember the breathtaking knife-throwing skill of Rongar.

BTV had a wide variety of sitcoms and talent hunts, from musical shows to magazine shows showcasing local talents of Bangladesh. We had our very own version of America’s *Got Talent* named *Notun Kuri*,

a show for kids and teens. Even today on Eid nights, my father eagerly waits in front of the TV for *Ananda Mela* to start. I never miss out on the famous magazine show *Ityadi* -- the brainchild of Hanif Sanket, which is undoubtedly the most successful magazine show in the history of Bangladesh television. The show consisted of different segments through which Sanket brought up social and cultural issues coated in humour and satire. My favourite part of the show was the famous “Nana Nati” duo and the foreign expats participating in Bangla skits.

Years have passed, and with time, the set-top box has taken the place of the TV aerial. It feels strange now to surf channels with the circular knobs of the television of CRT technology. There is no idiot box at the corner of the drawing room now. Instead, a sleek smart TV now adorns the wall with access to OTT platforms like Netflix, Hoichoi, and Bioscope. The land phones with dialer, film rolls with 36 snaps, and the VCR cassette tapes seem to be fairy tales in the journal of 5G.

That was our story. The albums we adorned with printouts from Fujifilm negative rolls were our Instagram; BTV popping up on the screen of the idiot box used to be today’s Netflix.

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