

Those Were The Days

Rahul Misra

Having stepped out of my teens and entered into the realms of adulthood, I

can't help but wonder about the changes that I will have to face, about how LIFE will start to be really different. But instead of looking ahead, I often find that I think about the past and am entrapped in a spell of nostalgia... After all, how can one forget those days of innocence, when there isn't a care in the world, when your image of everything around you is viewed through the rose- tinted glasses of childish enthusiasm?

One of the first things I remember is getting up early in the mornings for the football World Cup, cheering on those blue-and-white men kicking around that ball till it reached GOAL! Argentina was to me an alternate motherland of sorts then, one I must be absolutely patriotic to, although I had little idea of what the game was all about. The rest of the world must have cried foul over the 'hand of God', I didn't care. Maradona could do things with a black-and-white ball that I couldn't even dream of imitating.. he deserved to win! Things were so different back then, those were the days when hockey equalled cricket's popularity (at least where I grew up) and I owned a wooden hockey stick before I had a cricket bat. Pargat Singh was as famous as Kapil Dev and I actually had to teach our landlord the rules of cricket. And when I did, he said, "They do that for 5 days, how boring..."

The initial days of my childhood were without cable TV, no myriad channels to choose from. Fighting with siblings over the remote was a pastime not yet invented. Doordarshan was my window to the world and Wednesdays and Fridays were eagerly awaited for a half-an-hour of 'Chitrahaar'. 'Rangoli' on Sunday mornings was a great incentive to wake up early, the news break after it being quickly used to get bathed and ready for a pious dose of 'Ramayana'. I remember feeling very angry once because the electricity decided to play truant right in the middle of Lakshman and Meghnath's aerial battle. But thankfully, He-Man's conquests against Skeletor were spared. And I was able to watch part of the missed duel in the extended recap next week. From McEnroe's antics to Amitabh's anger... even Gorbachev's smooth, scarred, egg-head, Doordarshan opened to me an image of the world that I was free to accept or reject depending on its simplicity.

Unfortunately, there were no such options at school although the stuff I had to contend with was much simpler than the pointer and mech sol funds I come across now. Or perhaps, it just seems simpler when I look back. I often made mistakes in decimal addition and remembering that mercury was actually hydrargyrum (Hg) seemed to be an



mirror, mirror on our world...



exercise in futility. History was easily my favourite subject with its stories of great men going on adventures, leading mutinies and revolutions. Only, the dates were a bit of a hassle. I tried using rhymes to get to terms with them...

*"In the year fourteen-ninety-two,
Columbus sailed on the ocean blue"*

But by the time the exams came, the rhyme had been long forgotten. An answer had to be written and all I could come up with was...

*"In the year fourteen-ninety-three,
Columbus sailed on the deep, blue sea"*

America remained undiscovered for a year, two marks were lost, and I learnt that to make history, you need more than just two lines worth of creativity.

Another reason why I loved history was because the Indian freedom struggle fascinated me. 26th January and 15th August were dates I eagerly waited for. Standing at attention in school, saluting the tricolour gave me an immense sense of pride. Those were the times when the saffron of the flag didn't mean anything more than the green. I was an Indian before I was a Hindu and no one questioned it.

But then, there were also times when tragedies passed me by and I didn't question them. 'Scheduled Caste' was just another obscure phrase and 'Mandal', for me, was not about students fighting for their rights or people getting back what had been taken centuries ago. Hearing grownups indulge in vociferous debates didn't really affect me. When the newspaper came each morning, I overlooked the front-page photo of guys only a few years older setting themselves on fire. Instead, I turned to the inside pages where the headlines said, "Schools closed for a week by DM's orders" and smiled with joy. Their sorrow was the source of my happiness. Even during the Gulf War, I remember betting against my friends whether Bush would actually attack when Iraq overshot the Jan 15, 1990 deadline. Trapped in our childish cocoons, we never realized how we were playing with lives, placing money over the deaths of other people.

Other, even greater tragedies occurred after that. But I had perhaps grown up enough by then to realize the horror of it all. I could understand them, be affected by them. Sometimes, I wonder whether it was better earlier, when I didn't have to come to terms with mosques being destroyed, politicians eating fodder, men turning murderers. When I could recede into my shell to live in a country where "all Indians are my brothers and sisters." I wonder if I can again go back to a world where "Mera Bharat" is still unsarcastically "Mahaan." Those were the days when in my perception of the world, caste didn't matter and men didn't kill each other in the name of religion. Those were the days when I didn't have to hang my head down in shame.

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