**20 years of Tellywood | The Indian Express**

Related. There were many men in my life back in the Nineties. And Ive been in trouble ever since. CNNs Peter Arnett with a wisp of hair swaying in whichever direction the winds of war blew. I remember our first date: Baghdad,1991. Subhash Chandra Goel,who went from toothpaste tubes to the tube of plenty (1992). Li Ka-shings STAR TV that courted me with Star Plus,BBC and MTV. In 1993,that man Murdoch came calling. And lets not forget the phlegmatic Dr Manmohan Singh and former PM Narasimha Rao. But for them,foreign broadcasters and our own broadcast industry would not have bloomed and I would not be writing this piece about how an oblong box called the set-top box wired to a thick black cable seduced me. The most important man in my life,however,was Babloo (or was it Bunty?) from Regency Cable. We met often,sometimes every day. I could not live without him nor he without me. Hed arrive on a third-hand Bajaj scooter,saunter in with his tool box and give me what I wanted most: no,not something out of Fifty Shades of Grey but a good,clear cable connection so that I could rendezvous with all the other men I met on TV. These gentlemen were soon replaced in my affections. Cable TV made us fickle,choosy,picky. Suddenly,we did what had been unthinkable until then had over a dozen out-of-the-box affairs. Instead of one Doordarshan channel,we had 10,20 and then 50 channels: now,20 years late,we have over 800 TV channel choices. Back in the Nineties,the choices were very different. There was variety where now there is a sameness. Then MTV and Channel V meant music and had veejays to fall for: Trey,Danny McGill,Sophiya,Neelam,Ruby Bhatia and rustic Udham Singh. Now,MTV and {V} telecast teeny-bopper serials not nearly as evocative as Just Mohabbat,Campus,Hip Hip Hurray or Banegi Apni Baat of the Nineties. We had joy,we had fun,especially on DD 2,launched in response to cable-satellite TV, with sitcoms like Dekh Bhai Dekh,Shrimaan Shrimati and Tu Tu Main Main,which were peopled with good actors like Farida Jalal,Shekhar Suman and Bhavna Balsaver. Television created its own celebrities: Navneet Nishan,Renuka Shahane,Shefali Shah (then Chhaya),Kanwaljit Singh,Irrfan Khan (yes,he did TV then),Milind Soman,Neena Gupta and Sachin Khedekar. Mandira Bedi was Shanti before she wore spaghetti straps for cricket chakkars. They were individual stars unlike todays line-up of lookalike young belles and bods. Coming from the very propah era of Doordarshans programmes,cable TV was literally bold and beautiful,at once exciting as a first date and daring as an assignation. It was expensive Rs 500 per month and confined to the big cities. So it was metro-sexual,violent and often X-rated many shows wouldnt make it on air now. From Mohan Kapoors juvenile escapades in Saanp Seedi to Tara in love with an older man,to Savi in love with a man who was not her husband (Hasratein),to love after marriage in Sailaab and Saans,to perverted love in Amar Prem and Andaz or to the first lip-lock in Banegi Apni Baat (move over,Mr Kapoor and Priya). There was gay abandon in Tanaav and the only Indian-English serial,A Mouthful of Sky. Compelling female characters swore,smoked,got sloshed and wore pants to work and bed! What a difference from the pious sari ladies who succeeded them in the K-serials from 2000. Reality TV is not a post-2000 invention. Boogie Woogie began in the mid-Nineties,Sa Re Ga Ma Pa in 1995 and Rendezvous with Simi Garewal (1997) came seven years before Koffee with Karan. Those were experimental times. Amitabh Bachchan cut a music video Aby Baby,Sanjay Manjrekar a disc (Rest Day). Kanimozhi was a TV host (Sol Pudhidhu,Porul Pudhidhu,Sun),Svetlana and Lenin were TV characters in Swabhimaan,written by a writer called Shobhaa De and directed by Mahesh Bhatt. Plus 21 was a channel devoted to smut,we had advertisements for alcohol and India’s Most Wanted was a crime show with Suhaib Ilyasi,not a music request one. Then,Aaj Tak was a daily news bulletin (DD2),not the leading news channel of the new century. Then,Renuka Shahane appeared in eight serials at one go now,the same actress doesn’t last out the same role for more than a few years (Anandi,Balika Vadhu). And fast-forwards? Didnt exist. And still,as the Pepsi TV ad said,yeh dil maange more. Princess Diana’s death in August 1997 gave us a glimpse of the future: reality news TV. In 1998,Star launched Star News with Prannoy Roy’s NDTV and in 1999,Kargil became our first television war. Roy,Barkha Dutt,Rajdeep Sardesai were recognised equally by the sabziwallah and the Clintons. The Nineties belonged to entertainment,2000s to news and the letter K. Aaj Tak launched a 100 news channels in its wake. News became the single largest growth area on TV: over 400 channels and counting in all languages. It’s been the great equaliser: anyone with a couple of hundred crores spare cash launches one. Arnab Goswami is now the man we love and hate,Aap Ki Adalat still goes strong 16 years after Rajat Sharma started it for Zee. Amitabh Bachchans success with KBC saw Bollywood invade Tellywood: SRK,Salman and most recently Aamir Khan (Satyamev Jayate) flood news TV and reality shows. Kyunki coined saas-bahus into a catchphrase,spawned others like itself,and perhaps,in reaction to the libertine Nineties,celebrated parivar and parampara <U+0096> family and tradition. Tulsi,Parvati and Co reigned till 2008,challenged only by the buck-toothed lead of Jassi Jaissi Koi Nahin. The soaps were stylised,opulent and beautifully produced. In Ekta Kapoors hands,the bindi became a sex symbol. Tulsi made way for Balikas Anandi in 2008. And with her,rural India made a comeback as socials looked at caste,creed and colour Bidaai,Saat Phere,Na Aana Is Des Laado. Cable TV had shifted ground: it is available in 126 million homes equally distributed between urban and rural India (FICCI- KPMG,2012) . Internet and social media rival it for mindspace in cities but people like the Rs 5 crore KBC winner Sushil Kumar from Motihari have focused it on the other India. Which leaves just enough space to recall that although Sachin Tendulkar first played for India in 1989,he became TVs biggest superstar because cable and satellite TV made it possible for us to watch the cherubic maestro score every one of his thousands of runs. Thank you,Babloo. The Cable Guy. Irena Akbar. In 1992,when satellite television took off in India,Jugal Kishore was awed by the sight of huge dish antennae on terraces in Delhi. The dish was a status symbol, says Kishore,a local cable operator (LCO) in Geeta Colony,a middle-income neighbourhood made up of narrow lanes and cheek-by-jowl homes in east Delhi. So,he fixed the dish of Zee TV on his terrace,and began linking it to homes in Geeta Colony. A Star TV dish followed,and as the number of channels increased,the terrace of his small home-cum-office ran out of space. A skyline transformed by large satellite dishes is one of the many aspects of the business Kishore is nostalgic about. We used to deal directly with broadcasters. And as mobile phones were still not common,people would come to my office,requesting for connections or channels. They would offer me tea at their homes, he says. Twenty years on,Kishores customers have become more impatient; some do not think twice of calling him up at 2 am with complaints. He has stopped dealing directly with broadcasters,as high operating costs due to an increased number of channels have made way for the emergence of large intermediaries,known as multi-system operators (MSOs),who now,along with the broadcasters,call the shots. The local cable operator falls in line. Kishore,for example,is now installing set-top boxes provided by his MSO to 700 homes to meet the November 1 deadline of mandatory digitisation in Delhi. In Bangalore,Muniraju too basks in nostalgia. When I started out 15 years ago,the cable operator was a powerful person in a locality and customers tried to keep him happy. We now command influence only in lower middle-class homes that still use our services, he says. As satellite channels transformed the idea of entertainment,thousands of cable operators,like Kishore and Muniraju,grabbed the economic opportunity they represented. Along the way they fuelled the cable revolution in India and became Mr Fix-It for all TV crises but also earned themselves notoriety. For a long time,the cable operator was the brazen pirate who would under-report bills and viewers and erode revenues for all <U+0096> the broadcaster,the MSO and the government. The governments mandatory digitisation drive,which is being enforced in several cities in phases,is seen as a corrective to this. Rohit Nagpal of Babli Star Vision,which caters to 800 homes in Daryaganj,old Delhi,is indignant at the charge. We under-report our revenues because the customer doesn’t pay bills for six months,and then connects to another cable operator. He may have three TV sets but pays for one connection. He is the real thief! The cable operator,though,still counts: according to FICCI-KPMG report,2012,126 million of the 147 million homes in India with a TV set use cable TV today. But the rules of the game have changed. We are no longer the kings, says Nagpal,who serviced some1,200 homes before other cable operators and DTH ate into their pie. The customer is king now. Earlier,people were content with only four-five channels. Now if even one of the 200 channels doesnt beam,they demand it be fixed immediately. Many cable operators are,thus,selling their businesses to MSOs. Anjan Chatterjee,the man behind Jamshedpurs Steel City Cable Network,one of the largest cable operators in the city,has been in business since cable started,but now calls himself an office in-charge. Chatterjee,like four other cable operators in Jamshedpur,has allowed an MSO to acquire 51 per cent of his business. He says he doesnt have a choice. Someone has to bear the cost of set-top boxes <U+0096> the MSO buys them for Rs 1,799,but we cannot afford to pass on that cost to the customer, he says. In the face of such sweeping changes,LCOs still repose their faith in customer relations. We are the only strangers customers let into their bedrooms. Everyone else is attended to at the door, says Nagpal. Ahmedabads Ashish Teraiya believes he has an edge over DTH because we broadcast festival videos and city events. Nevertheless,the cable operator is looking for a Plan B. Kishore has started a photo studio,Muniraju has become a real estate agent,and Nagpal has taken to politics.