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Our First Television: A Kashmiri Story

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Like other parents across rural Kashmir, mine too were pushed towards drastic measures to get us a television to keep us in during the dark nights. The television almost got all of us killed.

In the Kashmir of the 1990s, survival was a curriculum the young mastered early. Misery, deprivation, and uncertainty were our daily subjects. But even the constant fear of gunmen in the dark could not keep the boys away from that one flickering shrine: the rare television in the neighbourhood.

Once a week, on Saturday at 9:30 pm, Doordarshan's National channel would broadcast a Bollywood movie. It was our weekly escape, our one night of forgetting. The neighbourhood house with the rare black-and-white television would transform into a packed, smoky cinema. We had decided tastes. We didn't care much for Shah Rukh Khan's early romance. But give us a movie with a good fight, a wild spectacle of flying fists and stylised blood—we were in heaven. We'd sit cross-legged on the floor, eyes glued to the crackling screen as if it were a window to another world.

When, as was inevitable, the picture would sizzle into a bright dot and die —a power outage—we'd groan, shuffle in the dark, and wait. Half-hours would stretch into an eternity, and with each passing minute, the cold of the winter night would bite a little deeper, and the thought of the walk home would grow a little heavier in our young chests.

Looking back, it wasn't just about the action. It was a psychological displacement, a two-hour escape from a reality where fear was the only constant. A movie without a single punch-up was dead on arrival, as unpopular as Shah Rukh Khan was for us. It wasn't about cinematic appreciation; it was about gulping down a few hours of entertainment in a society where fun was suppressed, squeezed from above by the gun and from within by our own religio-cultural make-up.

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The truly thrilling part for us boys, though, was when we would simply slink out into the ominous darkness towards our chosen shrine, leaving behind distressed, sleepless families. My return late Saturday night would often trigger a fresh round of household disputes: siblings squabbling, parents fretting. The frequent disappearing acts got so bad that parents across rural Kashmir were pushed towards drastic measures. They began selling off bits and pieces of their lives—copper utensils, sacks of rice and beans, a cow, the willows and poplars in their gardens—all to buy a television. The very source of family tension would become the family's most expensive investment.

For my family, the breaking point was one winter when my brother stumbled through the door just before midnight. He wasn't just trembling from the cold. His legs could barely hold him. He groaned as our mother rushed to him, trying to soothe him with her hands, even before she even understood what had happened. Under the pale, wavering light of the kerosene lantern my mother held up, my brother's shirt came up, revealing a crisscross of swollen red lines across his back: cane marks, fresh, angry. When my mother's fingers hovered near, he whimpered like a child. Our father stood nearby, his face tight with a familiar rage. He had warned my brother over and over: *Don't go out*. Through his tears, my brother snarled at my father. *I told you a hundred times to buy a TV. You won't. Not unless they take my life first.*

The room went quiet. My father said nothing. He just looked at his son's back, at those raw lines, and walked out into his room. For the first time, the argument was over. The fear that had kept us from buying a television—fear of attracting attention, of standing out, of inviting trouble—had found us anyway, right there on my brother's skin.

Within days, our ageing brown bull, too weak now to drag a plough, was led away to the butcher. My father didn't watch. He just took the cash and walked away. He returned with a second-hand television from a friend in the next village. It was small, yes. But it was unique. Unique because it was a colour television in a town still dreaming in black and white. And unique because my father, beaming with a pride he didn't fully understand, kept repeating the brand name like a prayer. *Akai. Akai. The best in the world.* He

knew nothing about electronics, but he knew those four letters mattered. To reassure himself, he would call me over. *Read it. What does it say?* I'd point to the front. *Akai, abba.* He'd nod, satisfied.

It took nearly a week to prepare for the first image. The toughest part was the antenna, a ladder-like contraption that had to be mounted high above the roof. We fixed it to the end of a long wooden lance, then tied that lance to the sturdiest pillar holding up our sloping roof. Then began the ritual. Someone would stay inside, watching the screen. Another would climb to the attic and slowly, painfully rotate the lance. *Left a bit. No, back! More! STOP!*-the shouts would echo through the house. Hours passed. Fingers froze. Patience thinned. But nobody complained. Because up in that attic, turning a pole in the cold, we weren't just chasing a signal. We were chasing something we had never quite caught before, a small, flickering promise of escape.

Finally, after weeks of trial and error, we were ready. On the appointed Saturday, with my elder brother now the designated television controller, the screen flickered to life. The movie was *Chunaoti*, starring Feroz Khan and Dharmendra. My father sat cross-legged on the floor, his eyes fixed on the screen. For two hours, he didn't blink. Didn't move. Didn't utter a word. And for the first time in months, the lights didn't go out. It felt like a miracle.

Unfortunately, the television brought its own kind of trouble. In a family built on agriculture, where every hand meant another row of rice planted, this small box became a weapon of mass distraction. Soon the same channel started playing movies on Sunday afternoons. My father would return from the fields, exhausted, only to find most of us lying like logs in the television room, eyes glassy, limbs useless.

The sight would detonate something in him. *Idlers! Good-for-nothings!* he'd holler, inventing new names for us each time. Then he'd curse the television itself - this same Akai he had once praised to the heavens. My elder brother, still carrying the memory of those cane marks on his back, would retaliate. Words were exchanged. Sharp ones. The kind that linger in corners long after they're spoken. Peace would abandon our home for weeks. The irony wasn't lost on me. We had bought the television to protect my brother from the darkness outside. But the darkness, it turned out, had simply moved indoors.

For me, the television became a torment. Being the younger one then was its own kind of torture. I had to obey the dictates of my elder brother, who now practically lived in front of the television. My father, once the undisputed head of our house, no longer dared to challenge him. The memory of that cane-beaten night had shifted something. So the elder brother ruled. And commanded me: *Go up. Turn the antenna. Left. No, slower. STOP.* Sometimes the signal refused to come. Half the movie would slip away as I stood up in the attic, arms aching, the ladder cold under my feet, turning the lance-antenna millimetres at a time. And just when the picture would finally lock into place, *pop*, the lights would die. The desperation was immense. But silence was the only shield.

I used to sleep in my father's room, but I wouldn't dare open his door to wake him. He was an angry man when disturbed. So I would sit there in the dark, huddled near the threshold, waiting. Waiting for the lights to return. When they finally flickered back, the signal would be perfect. But now the voltage would surge so high that even our poor transformer couldn't absorb it. The picture would warp, stretch, roll into chaos. Then came another order. *Go down! Earth the line.* This meant unhooking both wires from the main line in complete darkness. Then tying one to a long iron rod I would push deep into the cold earth. Then, with a crooked stick, I would carefully hook the other wire back onto the main line. The voltage would drop. The picture would steady. By then, only the last half hour remained.

What forced my father to buy that television is the very same thing that forced him to shut it forever. And in between, nothing belonged to us.

But oh, that half hour. That was the part we cherished. The much-anticipated thrill, the fight, the bloodbath, the villain's theatrical death, his entire gang mowed down in glorious mayhem. That's what we had waited for all along. That's what all movie lovers wanted then. And in the dim glow of that small Akai, surrounded by my family's silence, I understood something. We weren't just watching violence on screen. We were watching our own fears and frustrations play out in safe, distant shapes-exploding, dying, vanishing. So we could sleep another night.

It went on like this for a couple of years. The truce held, barely. Our ever-angry father, who once praised Akai to the heavens, now cursed it daily. He called it names I cannot repeat.

One night, as we sat mesmerised by a Bollywood climax, thieves raided our cowshed. They didn't take much. But they took the one thing that mattered; my father's favourite bull. The stubborn brute was legendary in our village, the undisputed king of the meadows, feared by every other bull that dared to graze there. His muscle and attitude had been my father's pride. Now he was gone, probably already sold to some butcher in town, just like our ageing bull before him.

My father didn't shout that night. He just stood in the empty shed, staring at the broken lock. The neighbours, sensing weakness, began stealing our hay, the precious winter store for the remaining cattle. Every morning, another few bundles missing. My father would stand at the window, knuckles white on the frame, watching his hard work disappear into someone else's shed.

One Sunday afternoon, it finally snapped. We were watching a movie, sprawled like contented slugs, when my father stormed into the room. In his hand, he held a *kangri*, the clay fire pot filled with glowing embers. With a roar, he hurled it at the television. The *kangri* missed. It sailed past the *Akai* and smashed against the wall behind, scattering burning embers everywhere. They skittered across the floor. Within seconds, small fires bloomed. We scrambled, shouting, stamping, beating the flames with our hands and clothes. My mother rushed in with water. Chaos. My father stood there, chest heaving, watching his failed revenge. The television played on, untouched. A hero was dispatching villains on screen while we fought real fires at home.

The irony was not lost on any of us. He had missed the television. But he had burned the matting instead. By the time the last ember died, the movie was over. My father walked out without a word, leaving us to sweep up the ashes. And somewhere in the village, I imagine, the stolen bull let out a victorious bellow.

But God had his own plans for that poor television. One Saturday night, Sunny Deol was on a rampage, beating all and sundry, his righteous fury filling our small room. Outside, a hard, commanding thump burst open the door, and before anyone could move, five or six men spilled in.

We knew that there were all types of gunmen around. Some were visible during the day, arms swinging from their shoulders, strolling through the streets like predators eyeing the perfect prey. You crossed the road when you saw them coming. Others wore uniforms and carried similar weapons but looked consistently angry, as if the gun had become an extension of their mood. Some were the dangerous ones - you rarely saw them, but you knew they existed, lurking. And some carried weapons and somehow embodied all categories at once. When one of them came to our doors at night, ordinary folk like us could never tell which category had just knocked. And nobody dared to find out by refusing. You just opened the door. You smiled. You served.

The group that barged in that night finally spoke. They declared themselves as those who had left their crying and pleading mothers behind for us. For us, who sat comfortably watching television while they suffered. Then one of them pointed at my brother. *You. Always watching.* They announced, emphatically, that this box was *haram*. Forbidden. A sin.

We didn't argue. We simply left the room. But we didn't go far. We huddled outside, near the door, in the cold. And through the thin walls, we could hear it, the familiar dialogue, the crash of punches, the background score. They were watching the movie. The same movie they had just declared forbidden. The same movie they had pulled us away from. I kept thinking: why would they force us out, only to watch it themselves?

My father, desperate now, sent my mother to plead with them. His whisper was urgent. The house could be blown up, he said. Nothing would be left for nine poor siblings. So my mother went. I pressed my ear to the door and heard her speaking to them in chaste Kashmiri. This surprised me. I had believed, somehow, that gunmen spoke only other languages - Urdu, maybe, or things we couldn't understand. But here they were, answering her in our own tongue, the same words we used at home, the same rhythm, the same cadence. They were from here. They were us.

They wanted food, they told her. And a *hookah*. Then they would leave. My mother hurried to prepare whatever she could find. When she brought it to them, they ate without hurry, as if they had all the time in the world. Then they pulled at the *hookah*, dragging the smoke deep into their lungs, their eyes still fixed on the screen where Sunny Deol was now probably finishing off the last villain.

Through a crevice in the door, I watched them. There they sat - armed, dangerous, capable of anything - watching a Bollywood movie in our home, eating our food, sharing our *hookah*. The same men who had declared the television *haram*. The same men who had left their mothers crying. By the time the movie neared its end, the *hookah* had gone quiet. They stretched, adjusted their weapons, and walked out without a word. The night swallowed them again.

No more Saturday nights. No more fights. No more climbing to turn the antenna, no more cursing the power cuts, no more sneaking back home in the dark.

I stayed at the crevice long after they left, trying to understand what I had just witnessed. Men with guns who spoke like us, ate like us, smoked like us, watched the same movies as us. And yet, they could kill us. They could have had our home blown up. They could decide, on a whim, that our lives mattered or didn't.

The movie was over. But the real one never ended. When they left, it was midnight. My father emerged from the neighbour's home where he had been hiding. He didn't say a word. He walked straight to the television, grabbed it in both arms, and carried it up to the attic. We heard a heavy thud as he dropped it in the darkest corner. Then he came down and looked at each of us. *If anyone brings it back*, he said quietly, *there will be consequences you cannot imagine*. He believed, with every fibre of his being, that if those gunmen had stayed even a little longer, our home would have been blown up by morning. The television had almost killed us all.

Nobody dared bring it back. The corner became its grave. Sometimes, in the months that followed, I would climb up to the attic. I would remove the dust settling on its surface and just stand there, looking into the dark grey screen. My own reflection stared back, faint and distorted. I would stand until my mother called, until the light shifted, until my legs grew tired.

The while would stretch into an eternity of nothingness.

No more Saturday nights. No more fights. No more climbing to turn the antenna, no more cursing the power cuts, no more sneaking back home in the dark. The silence in that attic was complete. The *Akai* sat there like a sleeping animal, its single eye blank, its magic finally and fully dead.

Strange, isn't it? What forced my father to buy that television-the fear of what lurked in the dark-was the very same thing that forced him to shut it forever. And in between, nothing belonged to us. Not the television. Not the nights. Not even our own small room, with its flickering screen and its dreams of victory.

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