

LEAVING THE WAR BEHIND



My earliest memories of war were olive-coloured military trucks trundling down the road towards the border of what was then East Pakistan. Grim looking soldiers – their helmets camouflaged – held their guns in absolute concentration, indefatigably alert. Children, often holding the elders’ hands, lined up along the road to cheer the men in uniform. Barely five years old, I was one of them. The year was 1965. In the uneasy blacked-out evenings, some of our neighbours would sit in a circle in our front room for the news. Our black Murphy radio with its blue magic eye, placed on a shelf above, was a clear sign of our relative affluence. In a Calcutta suburb, every home did not have a radio in those days. Almost the entire news bulletin was about the heavy losses and retreat of the *enemy*. The men in the room would start a debate in no time about the prospects of the Indian Army.

The years after the war were extremely harsh. Sugar disappeared from the market; people tried a new thing as tea sweetener – saccharine. The old women, who would chitchat with my grandmother on our veranda in the afternoon, complained bitterly about the scarcity of rice, about the new foodstuffs called maize and milo. Raised on a staple of rice, for them such alien food was an assault, an abomination. As if in response to the food crisis, a new spell of political unrest gripped the country. Waves of protests and strikes swept almost every part of India. Caste-based regional parties came to power in a number of states in 1967. And an ultra-left group, a breakaway faction of the mainstream communist movement, gave a call for armed struggle in the Himalayan foothills of Naxalbari in North Bengal. This brand of Maoist radicalism captured the imagination of a section of the urban youth and spread into many parts of the country.

Soon, war beckoned the troops to the borders again. In 1971 it was a two-way movement along the same road: if our forces rushed to what was emerging as a new country – Bangladesh – from the other end came the refugees, hundreds of thousands of them escaping the brutalities of the Pakistani troops.

Suddenly, war was intensifying on many fronts around the world. Vietnam was not just another battlefield but a new metaphor of grit and courage, and

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unities were forged at fronts vastly different from each other: warriors and protesters. In 1973, the US withdrew its forces in the face of heavy assault from the Vietcong, and finally, in 1975, Saigon fell to a full-scale attack by North Vietnam. Vietnam was an inescapable influence in our growing-up years. Fed on the legend of the Dien Bien Phu battle, we loved quoting from Bertrand Russell's *War Crimes in Vietnam*. Vietnam was part of the seventies vocabulary.

History, as we would learn soon, had a subtle sense of humour, a wry way of chronicling events. In the beginning of 1979 – a slight hint of winter still in the air – one morning a CPI activist was distributing a leaflet in the street corner. Angry, agitated, he was shouting at the top of his voice: *Denounce China's attack on Vietnam. It's a betrayal of the socialist cause.* Beijing which had strongly backed Hanoi in the war against the US, lavishing sophisticated weaponry on the Vietcong troops, sent its forces across the border and captured some of the cities inside Vietnam. But the real twist of the tale was in its tail. The battle-hardened Vietnamese troops, with long years of their epic war against the US behind them, brilliantly fought back and bashed up the invading Chinese!

Almost around the same time, an expansionist Soviet Union attacked Afghanistan, triggering a new spell of instability in the region. The consequences of the Soviet invasion of the mountainous, tribal country had a deep bearing on the 21st century world. Transformation of terror as a global phenomenon, emergence of non-state players, the so-called war of civilization, the daring aerial attack on New York, the rise of the bin Laden brand of terrorism – almost every earth-shaking event of the new century could be traced to the Kremlin's decision to control the strategically important landlocked country by installing its puppet in Kabul in 1979. Newspapers and magazines were full of stories from Afghanistan. Afghan refugees in makeshift camps in Peshawar were a big draw for journalists from around the world: human interest stories were all the rage then. With the US rushing to the aid of the victims of the Soviet aggression, some of the children growing up in the refugee camps picked up stray English phrases and bits of the insouciant American accent. Neither their benefactors nor tormentors had any idea that those squalid camps were actually the nursery of the future Taliban, one of the most indoctrinated and dreaded terror outfits, the force that would one day bomb the Bamiyan Buddhas and unleash the worst kind of atrocities on women in Afghanistan. Those days, however, the dominant tone of the media was one of outrage and condemnation, disapproving of Soviet expansionism. One exception was a despatch by Patricia J. Sethi of *Newsweek* from inside Afghanistan. She brought out the picture of invisible change taking place in that feudal, male-dominated society. Sethi wrote about 15-year-old girls carrying rifles as members of a civilian brigade in a village near Kabul. 'We do not want to become the fourth wife of a 60-year-

old man, existing solely for his whim and pleasure,' Khaleda told her.

War, one knew, had crept and would keep on sneaking into our life again and again. It's your memory; it's a sinister shadow over the future. In the neighbourhood, within the family there were still those men who had participated in the Second World War. On a rainy evening at the dinner table someone recounted the days on a distant front as a junior RAF officer, a front where death had whizzed past them at unguarded moments. Some of the soldiers who survived – or didn't – were sensitive men with a creative mind. Like Rupert Brooke, like Erich Maria Remarque.

Years later, walking down Park Street to Park Mansions in Calcutta for my French class, I bought Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*, the bestselling novel about the First World War. Remarque, a German conscript, survived to write about it all. Some of the best works of fiction have been about war. Perhaps because the battleground evokes the most extreme of human emotions, their accounts in fictional terms wrench and devastate the reader, or perhaps unsettle him into thinking and rethinking what he thought he always knew. I had this disquieting experience while reading Bangladeshi writer Anisul Hoque's novel, *Ma*. Tired, sleepy after a long day's work, I picked up the book for bedtime reading one night. The courage and nobility of Safia Begum, the central character, her decision to sacrifice her only son to the cause of her country's liberation, waves of protests in Dhaka and indescribable barbarity of an occupation army had an electrifying effect on me. I felt so many angry hearts throb all around me, a geographic territory pulsate with aspirations for freedom. A few years later I took the initiative to publish the book in English translation (*Freedom's Mother*) from Palimpsest.

From Safia Begum to Dorrigo Evans is not a long distance, at least physically. If the defiant, gutsy woman (a real-life character) lived in Dhaka, the Australian doctor taken prisoner by the Japanese during the Second World War witnessed the most inhuman treatment of prisoners by their captors for the construction of a railhead in Burma. "For if the living let go of the dead, their own life ceases to matter", author Richard Flanagan's observation on the macabre chiaroscuro of life and death around the railway project in this year's Booker winning novel, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, creates a profound sense of disquiet in you.

The slow process of death with an air of inevitability about it gnaws at you almost eliminating the line between life and death:

As he waited, Dorrigo Evans flexed his body as he once had