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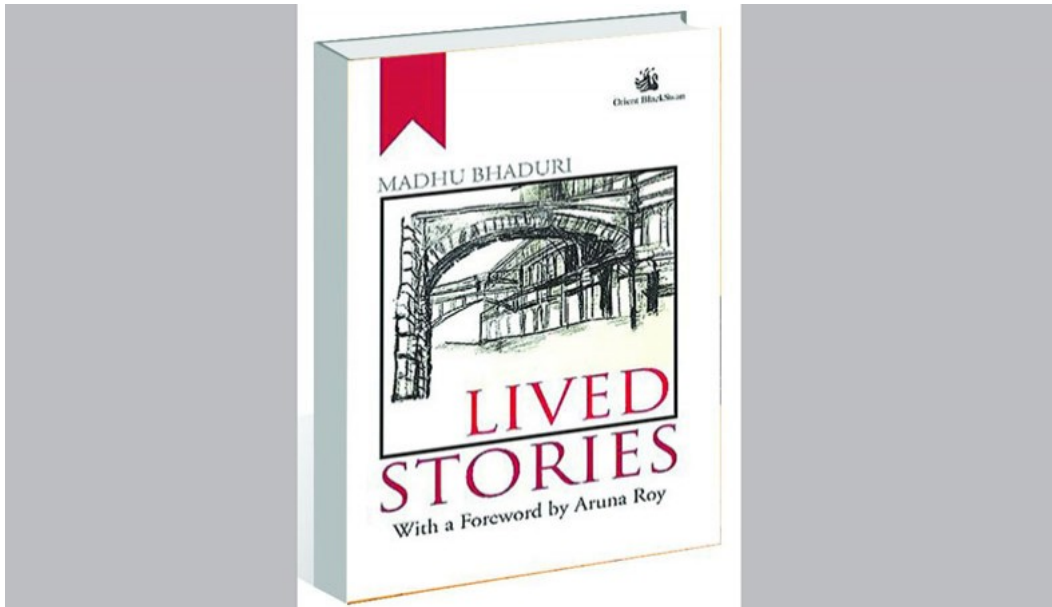
NEWAGE

LIVED STORIES

Travel through a non-rational choice

by Farooque Chowdhury ([https://www.newagebd.net/credit/by/Farooque Chowdhury](https://www.newagebd.net/credit/by/Farooque%20Chowdhury)) | Published: 00:00, Oct 30,2022

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INCIDENTS are told in simple, straight style, but significant in meaning; and, metaphors are there in the Lived Stories.

Madhu Bhaduri tells her days as an Indian diplomat in Vienna, Hanoi, Mexico City, Hamburg, Minsk and Lisbon. These are about geopolitics and war, economy and history, culture, persons and people and about undaunted spirit of humanity.

As first secretary to the Indian embassy in Hanoi, she saw the destruction the US war 'awarded' Vietnam. That was with carpet bombing and chemical weapons:

'Central Vietnam was cut off because most of its towns were uninhabited ruins. [...] Vinh in Central Vietnam [...] had only one small brick house left standing, surrounded by ruins. There was no connectivity between the North and South except through small government airplanes since Central Vietnam had been completely ravaged by bombing.'

On way to Cu Chi, as Madhu Bhaduri drove out of Saigon, later rechristened Ho Chi Minh City, 'the landscape gradually began transforming into larger and larger bomb craters on all sides, till finally, as far as the eye could see, there was no sign of life. Not even a blade of grass. It could have been a landscape on the moon.'

'Anything that was left intact [in Cu Chi] was burnt with Agent Orange, a deadly chemical.'

Hue 'was totally destroyed during American bombing.'

'The then American General, Westmoreland, had boasted that Vietnam would be bombed back to the Stone Age. Forty years ago, I had personally seen the Stone Age in Cu Chi.'

This hard fact is in her Lived Stories, a 139-page book (Orient BlackSwan, Hyderabad, Telangana, India, 2021).

Based on cyclorama around, she raises undeniable questions, or makes irrefutable statements: 'In the Middle East, the United Nations has acted like a pliable tool of the most dominant military power.' None can deny this fact. Her narration: 'The UN-approved team led by Hans Blix, former chief of the International Atomic Energy Agency, clearly stated in his report to the UN that there was no evidence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. The world watched on TV screens as he [Hans Blix] said this, but the excuse was still maintained. Fifteen years later. Iraq is still recovering from the destruction of a war which was based on a lie.'

She also refers to the war in Syria and writes: 'The political geography of a prosperous West Asia in 1980 has now been reduced to a dust.'

The former ambassador straightly tells the truth: 'As for the attack on Libya, the UN was sidelined. NATO powers wanted to get rid of Gaddafi. Once again, the world watched as this was achieved by concentrated bombings, which killed the people and destroyed their land. Did the people of Libya not count?' A seemingly impossible question in imperialist world order it is.

And, a phantasmagoric picture she paints on readers' mind: 'In hindsight, Gaddafi's Libya appears like a mirage in the desert.'

An equation she presents that haunts many countries in the periphery: 'Perhaps what counted were the rich oil reserves in Iraq and in Libya, which had given confidence and, as it turned out, a false sense of independence to the leaders of these countries.'

The tragic fact is told: 'Gaddafi's contempt for America and American antipathy towards him escalated over time. Three decades later, Gaddafi and Libya paid a heavy price for standing up to the superpower. While Saddam Hussein was killed and Iraq destroyed [...], Libya was bombed and totally crushed by NATO powers, in attacks exclusively from the air till the country was totally shattered beyond recognition. Gaddafi was brutally murdered. This was all done in the name of instituting democracy in these countries.' 'Institute democracy' — refrain of a superpower trying to impose its system on all.

The reality turns complex if Vietnam, Libya and Iraq are compared. In one land in the east, people compelled imperialism down to defeat while the superpower wrought reality of destruction in two other lands, strangulated peoples in those lands.

The military power bombed Yugoslavia into pieces. Madhu writes, while telling his second-time posting in Vienna in 1986, '[T]here was growing unrest in Yugoslavia [...]. After the death of President Tito, [...] there first began murmurs and then aggressive struggles [...] for separate statehood. [...] The struggles [...] began to turn bloody very soon. [...] Indeed Yugoslavia, after much bloodshed, broke up into six new' spheres on the political map — Balkanized. NATO's 78-days-bombing on that land is known to all the news-readers.

The story surfaces, even if partly, with an information she presents while describing her days as ambassador to Minsk, Belarus, and concurrently also ambassador to Vilnius, Lithuania in 1996: 'In a referendum held in March 1991 before the breakup of the Soviet Union, 83 per cent of the people of Belarus had voted in favor of preserving the Soviet Union. It was the President Yeltsin's [of Russia] vulnerability to American and NATO pressure that forced Belarus into becoming a separate nation, despite the overwhelming desire of the people to remain a part of Russia.'

Her comment, in Lived Stories, on this incident of denying people's verdict may sound acidic to the mainstream: 'The loud voices of Western democracy turn very undemocratic when it comes to their perception of what constitutes their own "strategic interest".'

Lived Stories move on with tells of politics, people, arts, songs, and facts. While describing a day as consul general in Hamburg in 1992, from her 35 years in the Indian foreign service, she refers to a title of an exhibition: 'Somewhere or the other, each one of us is a minority'. She writes: 'Since somewhere or the other we are all a minority [...] without organizing protest, the chances of gaining protection are dim.' Her approach to one of the problems confronting peoples in countries — organize, protest — is unequivocal, but forgotten by many, most of the time.

While discussing the minority issue she looks at the question of democracy: 'The seeds of the targeting of minorities, to a large extent, lie within the idea of democracy itself, which is rule by the majority, which turns into rule for the majority.' The problem, here, comes with the definition of 'majority' and 'minority'. From the class point of view, democracy is always a rule of one class or of a group of classes over another class or a group of classes; and thus, it turns as democracy for the ruling classes and dictatorship over the ruled. This, reality does not wither away in the most democratic system irrespective of bourgeois or proletarian in terms of class character. But, no democracy can turn democracy if it fails to accommodate the smaller in number, the weaker in power and position, be it a community, a creed, a culture, a practice, an opinion, or of a region. So, the issue is better to identify as 'minority community' or 'a creed in minority number', etc.

Madhu, an admirer of Gabriel Garcia Marquez, tells of the novelist's Delhi visit along with Fidel Castro. That was on the occasion of their participation in the Non-Aligned summit. But none could recognise the novelist travelling with a Cuban passport and with the elder Castro. Marquez was recognised at the airport on the departure day of Fidel.

Before joining the Indian foreign service, she had been a lecturer in philosophy at Indraprastha College, Delhi University for three years. 'From time to time', she 'had wondered if it was not a mistake to have switched from teaching to diplomacy.' It was her travel through time and space by a non-rational choice, probably. The formula was reminded to her by SK Bose, a legendary teacher of philosophy, while she sought his advice on selecting university for studying philosophy, as she was offered admission in the Oxford and Cambridge universities.

And, she writes: 'Retirement from the IFS came with an enormous sense of having earned my "liberation".' A character surfaces with the feeling — liberation.

'In the process of going from place to place', she writes, 'some baggage is often left behind intentionally, but a lot is lost in transit. The heavy baggage which we shed is often a boon to us.' She left some and she gained some. Which one is heavy, she and time are to judge.

Born in a November day in 1943 in Lahore, but she had to leave behind the city while the beautiful 'city was in flames, shortly before the partition. [...] Telephone was dead. All around [...] flames of fire were rising.' Her 'grandparents and great-grandfather refused to leave their beloved Lahore, which was "home". [Her] father's grandfather died in Lahore on the intervening night of 14-15 August 1947, and had to be cremated [...] in the garden of the house' overlooking the racecourse with palm trees. Does a metaphor appear? The industrialist family was almost in ruins. Last four members of her family left Lahore after Liaquat Ali Khan, Pakistan's first prime minister, and her grandfather's friend warned: Their lives were in danger. So, they left home for airport in the official car of the PM along with the PM's motorcycle escort, and left Lahore airport by a private plane provided by the PM.

Following her retirement, Madhu Bhaduri involved herself with the Right to Information movement. One of her work was the Right to Water Campaign, which challenged the World Bank's water plan benefiting the powerful and the rich. The RWC thwarted the WB plan.

While the plan was being encountered, astonishing facts came to light that included the hiring of a firm as consultant preferred by the lender agency, the national agency's arm-twisting by the lender, private players' entry for profit, fixing criteria in a way that qualifies foreign companies and keeps national companies away, a salary of \$24,400 (Rs 11,00,000) per month for 84 experts, which was equivalent to Rs 105 crore [10 million = 1 crore] per annum, the hiring of a person related to a boss, but having no qualification for the job.

Lived Stories tell this part of the struggle in a lively way — an exposure with practical example, and a lesson for organising similar struggles, a functional outline of a work in an area related to people, especially the poor. It was also a brief tale of the poor's hapless condition. With a sad tone, she writes in the chapter on his posting in Mexico City: '[I]ndifference to the helplessness of fellow citizens.'

practical reference that helps understand a part of politics.

But, story with people is not frustrating. Again, it is Vietnam. She writes:

During her first visit, she found “[A] team was working to level the ground. They had only shovels and bamboo baskets to fill a large bomb crater with mud. I [Madhu] wondered how long it would take to fill those innumerable and unending holes. It seemed to me to be an impossible task.’ As she arrived at the administrative centre, a hut made of bamboo and mud, she was ‘offered a cup of hot water which did not have the usual green tea leaves.’ The ‘dong chi’, comrade, in charge of the centre said: ‘Things are bleak now, but on your next visit I will offer you a cup of fragrant tea. [...] When I was leaving, my host said to me very sincerely, “When you come next, we will share with you a meal of rice grown here.” [...] In September 2015, Amit and I also travelled to Vietnam after forty years. [...] I was taken aback by what I saw. Those tiny bamboo huts with thatched roofs had disappeared. Their place was taken by colorful brick houses, two or three storied high. [...] As we approached Cu Chi [...], both sides of the road were covered with tall bamboo and green trees. [...] In between, there were fields and nurseries of orchids. Vietnam is one of the leading suppliers of these exotic flowers to Japan. [...] Vietnam is overtaking India as the leading exporter of black peppers. [...] [R]ice is one of [Vietnam’s] biggest exports. This nation, which has defeated a superpower and its sophisticated war technology on the strength of its bicycles and its determination, has with the same determination been providing welfare to its people. Salaam [salute] Vietnam.’

‘It is a story of a woman in a man’s world’, writes Aruna Roy, a former IAS officer, Madhu’s friend and former colleague at Indraprastha College. When Aruna decided to quit the IAS, she sought Madhu and Amit’s opinion. ‘Their unstinting support further sealed’ Aruna’s ‘determination to quit. For both of us, the kursi [chair] was never important. In fact, retiring from civil service spelt liberation.’ Madhu Bhaduri turns much specific with Aruna Roy’s telling.

Lived Stories presents a part of Madhu Bhaduri and a part of the functioning of a state, its accessories, and of persons majestic and ordinary, of Romila Thapar, the distinguished historian and Madhu Bhaduri’s friend, and of Mario Soares, the socialist leader of Portugal, Indira Gandhi and APJ Abdul Kalam, of an aspiring artist having no piano, a bus driver in Mexico City and cheated citizens from rural India.

Farooque Chowdhury writes from Dhaka.