FIRST HISTORY LESSONS

ASPECTS OF WAR

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First History Lessons:
Aspects of War

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Map is not to scale

A Statement

October 7, 2023. *Juddher Nana Dik*, the Bengali original of Aspects of War, was at the press. Copies were to reach us in two days. This English translation had been completed. That was when we received the horrifying news. An organisation from Palestine named Hamas had suddenly attacked Israel. Indiscriminate firing and rocket attacks had killed hundreds of civilians, many more had been injured, and Hamas had taken several people hostage. Going on the warpath immediately, Israel vowed revenge. Then it launched a counter-attack, and it was the turn of civilians in Gaza to be massacred indiscriminately. We felt it necessary to say a few things about this war in the English edition of the book.

At first sight it appears to be Hamas that is the root of all the trouble. Its violent attack cannot be supported in any way whatsoever. Still, there's a 'but'. Over the past 75 years, Israel has gradually occupied the land of Palestinians and extended its frontiers. Sometimes with the help of legal loopholes and sometimes by dint of brute force, it has cornered Palestinians repeatedly. The number of helpless Palestinians who have been killed in this ongoing war is beyond count. So before taking sides, it is necessary to consider who's responsible, and where it all actually began. It is important to understand the history of the whole thing.

You know what's strange? The Jews, whose country Israel is, have themselves been subjected to great oppression. They were the objects of Hitler's ire during World War II. Many of them were killed, and it was only the fortunate among them who managed to escape to America and other European countries. At the end of the war, the important people of the world collectively decided to support the demands of Jewish nationalists to create a new country for them. Choosing a slice of Palestine, they created Israel, a homeland for Jews scattered around the world. So Israel came from nowhere to occupy this land on the strength of international treaties. Their greatest supporters are America and the powerful countries of western Europe. It is on the strength of this support that Israel has flourished. And from the oppressed, it has with time turned into the oppressor.

And finally, one more thing. Even modern warfare has laws. Attacking hospitals, schools, or religious institutions, and targeting civilians and denying them relief—these are considered war crimes. But as we can see during this war, these crimes are continuing unabated. Truth be told, much of this is being backed by America. So, the question arises, what are the benefits of continuing with this war, and who gets to reap these benefits?

Keep these questions in mind. For more details, check this link, you will come to know of many books on the subject. https://www.mymodestmama.com/childrens-books-about-palestine/

1. Kinds of war

Pick up your mobile phone and there's a flurry of violent war games. Soldiers kill one another with lethal weapons to gain victory. Even when we switch the TV on we watch, wide-eyed, so many horrifying things being done with machine guns and rockets and missiles in many films. The bad guys lose and the good guys win. But then, we also see many people dying in these war films. So many people suffer when there's a war. It's true—more than 100 million people have died in the two World Wars alone. And still the wars don't stop. There's a war going on right now between Russia and Ukraine, for instance. It's been over a year and a half, and yet there are no signs of its coming to an end. So many have become homeless, so many people have disappeared, so many beautiful buildings and churches and statues are being destroyed by bombs. Crops cannot be grown in the fields. Then, why do we still go to war?

There is no end to human demands—the more people get, the more they want. And when they don't get what they want, they declare 'might is

right' and try to snatch it away. Sometimes they go to war to grab more land, sometimes for more water, sometimes for oil. And sometimes they fight on grounds of religion or language. Sometimes people have even had to go to war to protect themselves from unfair rule by others, to safeguard their own rights. Nations like Portugal, Spain, France, and England had occupied countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America as colonies. The struggle of the people of these countries to free themselves from European powers took the form of war in some places. In the North African country of Algeria, for instance, war was waged from 1954 to 1962 to secure independence from France. The small country of Vietnam in south-east Asia fought a war of independence in two phases. And our neighbouring country of Bangladesh was formed after a liberation war in 1971. We will come to this later.

Wars have been fought between humans from the beginnings of civilisation. All the ancient epics were written with war as their subject. But society, ethics, politics, science, and technology have all changed a lot with time. So have the methods of waging war. The more the technology of war has

developed, the bigger are the battlefields and the greater is the destruction. The rocks used as weapons in ancient times have been replaced by missiles. Horses and elephants and swords have made way for tanks, warplanes, and ever newer guns and cannons. Some countries even have nuclear bombs in their armouries. Wars would lead to damages and loss of lives earlier too, but the nature of war kept these things limited to small areas. Besides, the lives of ordinary people were far less affected by war back then. But the two World Wars drastically changed everything. War began making an impact on society, on the economy, and on everyday lives around the world. During World War II, bombs wiped out entire cities and villages. The USA dropped atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki during this war. Nearly 200,000 people died in these two places within minutes. So, we will read the history of war keeping in mind the fact that the nature of war has changed with time.

Now, the history of war can be read in many ways. The causes and outcomes of a particular war can be the subject of such a history. The changes in the maps of a region as a result of new areas being conquered

or lost can also provide a way of reading the history of war. Or, going year by year to examine who waged war in which region, how empires expanded, whose wealth was captured by whom—this can also be a way to write the history of war. But we will not do any of this. We will read the history of war by placing some questions in the foreground. How does the natural world affect war? How can a war in one location change the way of life in a distant place? What does it mean to wage war for one's rights? There have been countless wars in the history of the world, but to make our discussions easier we have chosen the region of eastern India and Bangladesh in this book. From the history of wars during different periods in this area, we will try to find the answers to the questions mentioned above.

2. Nature, the environment, and war

Looking back at history allows us to see that the methods of waging war vary according to the natural conditions, climate, and environment of a place. But we must also keep in mind the time when the war took place, and what kind of weapons were in use during that period. When the opposing sides go to battle with foot-soldiers and cavalry and swords or with cannons and rifles, the land and terrain, the canals and rivers, the rain and storms must all be examined. Take the Mughals, for instance—they fought both in Rajasthan and in Bengal and Assam. Efforts to conquer Bengal began in 1575, under Akbar's reign. They had no difficulties fighting with horses and cannons on the dry terrain of Rajasthan, but in Bengal and Assam, they found themselves in deep trouble in the jungles and forests, streams and rivers, creeks and canals, torrential rain and floods. Their horses and heavy artillery would often be stuck in the mud and water. So they had to develop new techniques of warfare. To fight on watery terrain, the Mughals learned the use of boats. Arrangements were

made to place cannons on large boats named *ghurabs*. They even mastered the art of attacking from both land and water at the same time. They also began using elephants in various ways on wetlands and in rivers.

War isn't something only kings and emperors are involved in. Consider the chessboard, where so many different characters are involved. And chess is nothing but a game of war. In the Indian version of chess, the king and the minister are flanked by elephants, horses, and boats. In front of them are the foot-soldiers. If this war is to take place in an area full of water bodies, like Bengal and Assam, the boats will turn out to be very important. Here boatmen will account for a large number of the foot-soldiers on the chess board. In the same way, local boatmen became extremely important during the Mughals' military campaign in Bengal. They would not have made any headway without the help of these people in making and rowing boats. It was the same people who taught the Mughals to build battle forts of mud on river banks. These boatmen had the power to halt the campaign unless their demands were met. Let me tell you a story. In 1608 the Mughal *subahdar* Islam Khan Chisti was on his way to a battle against

an Afghan leader named Musa Khan. Trouble broke out halfway through his journey with a fleet of boats. One morning Islam Khan discovered that the boatmen, furious at not having been paid, had run away. He was stuck with his army, unable to move forward or backward. It was a royal mess! How was he to fight unless the boatmen returned? You can see how powerful they were.

After a long struggle with the rivers and the water bodies, the Mughals eventually established their rule over Bengal around 1666, during Emperor Aurangzeb's reign. By then they had mastered the art of fighting with boats to some extent. But when they went farther east towards Kamrup (present day Assam), they faced a debacle thanks to the Brahmaputra river. Assam was then a land of dense forests, mountains, and a ferocious Brahmaputra in the rainy season. The inhabitants of Assam were inherently superior to the Mughals in river warfare. The Mughals had constructed large boats with cannons mounted on them, but the people of Assam were far more adept at building and operating the kind of boats best suited to the environment. With their small but swift boats, they attacked the Mughals

like guerrilla fighters under cover of the night, sending them into a tizzy. Eventually the Mughals began to leave Assam after losing the Battle of Saraighat in 1671.

About seventy years later, the monsoon in Bengal brought the Bargis, a group of Maratha soldiers, to their knees. Bengal was ruled by Nawab Alivardi Khan (1740–1765) at the time. At the beginning of the eighteenth century the Bargis had laid siege on Bengal to capture some of its wealth. The Marathas had demanded a tax named *chauth*. Simply put, the invaders demanded an additional one-fourth of the amount that the people of Bengal already paid to the nawab as tax. The people were terrified. It was probably the worry about how to survive after paying such high taxes that led someone to compose a rhyme that is still well-known:

> Baby's asleep, the night is deep
> The Bargis have invaded us
> The birds have all eaten the grain
> How will we pay our tax

When they didn't get the chauth tax that they had demanded, the Bargis began to ransack the state, killing and maiming people everywhere. They burnt down one village after another. Hindu or Muslim, rich or poor, no one was spared from this distress. When Nawab Alivardi Khan's forces were floundering under a wave of attacks, it was the Bengal monsoon that finally stopped the Bargis in their tracks. But their tyranny resumed as soon as the rain stopped, though Alivardi Khan succeeded in repelling them eventually with various strategies.

Coping with the rivers and water bodies and the rain and storm was a vital task during any war being fought in Bengal and Assam. The influence of the East India Company in Bengal kept growing from the middle of the eighteenth century, and the power of the Nawabs weakened. The officers of the Company had realised that neither conducting trade nor ruling over Bengal would be possible unless they could control the rivers. Seizing a share of the trade along the Hooghly river, they established the city of Calcutta on the low-lying swampland in the south. From here they gradually consolidated their rule over Bengal. But their greed for profits

and power ensured they didn't limit themselves to the state. Just like the Mughals, they too tried to venture further east. The dominant reign of the Burmese kings ran across Assam, Cachar, Manipur, Chattagram, and the Arakan (present-day Burma). They monopolised traffic on rivers like the Irrawadi and the Brahmaputra. But to conduct its trade, the East India Company had to run its steamers on these rivers without being obstructed. This meant it was necessary to defeat the Burmese and stamp their control on the rivers. So war broke out, with the First Anglo-Burmese War being fought from 1824 to 1826. It took place primarily in the jungles and on waterways. The greatest strength of the Arakan kings was their enormous boats. But it became clear that technology could upset many calculations when a steamer named Diana, setting sail from Calcutta, defeated the Arakan fleet on the Irrawadi. This was the first time modern steamers were used for war on the Indian subcontinent. The old-fashioned boats of the Burmese couldn't do much against the might of the steam-powered engine. The British defeated the Burmese and established their rule over Chattagram, Cachar, and a section of the Arakan.

The British kept a strict eye on rivers as long as they ruled over India. Towards the very end of their rule, Japan occupied Burma during World War II (1939–45). The British rulers were afraid that they would now enter Bengal, Assam, and Manipur too. Their fear that the Japanese enemy would use the waterways to advance led them to destroy or impede the movement of many of the boats. This meant enormous hardships for common people. It became difficult for them to transport food and other commodities along the riverways, and even to catch fish for that matter.

The remoteness of the terrain, natural calamities, snow-and-rain, and other such things have often determined what kind of wars will be fought in different parts of the world. We have read about Bengal and Assam, and there are many examples from the histories of other countries too. Warmongers like Napoleon and Hitler had to retreat after being weakened by the infamous Russian winter. And yet the Russia-Ukraine war has been going on since February 2022, defying this cold climate. Many people thought the fighting would slow down in the icy temperatures of December, but that did not happen. As I said earlier, the characteristics and

technology of war and the preparations for it have changed greatly with time. And so the relationship between nature, the environment, and war has been transformed too. Armed forces now have the kind of weapons, vehicles, and clothing that can overcome various natural barriers to keep wars going.

3. War at home and abroad

Delve into history and you will see the character of war changing gradually from the time of World War I. Regional wars have crossed borders to become international. The effects of war in one country are felt in another. The economies of various countries are interlinked in today's world. Many different things are exchanged between countries. So when there's war in one country, prices of things sometimes shoot up in another. Take the war between Russia and Ukraine. Pakistan used to import wheat from both these countries. The war has made wheat scarce in both Russia and Ukraine, and it has become very expensive in Pakistan as a result. Many of the European countries used to buy oil from Russia. The supply of fuel to them has dropped during the war, forcing them to buy oil from other countries at high prices. While the war rages in Ukraine and Russia, expenses are shooting up for common people in Pakistan and Germany. There is no respite even if you live far away from where the war is going on, everyone faces difficulties in one way or another.

From the eighteenth century till the beginning of the twentieth century,

all the powerful countries of western Europe had joined the race to occupy and colonise regions of Asia and Africa. When war broke out at one end of their enormous empire, the effects were felt all the way over to the other end. Take World War I (1914–1918). On one side were Britain, France, and Russia, joined later by the United States of America. And their opponents were countries like Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Turkey. Even if there was a battle between just one of the countries on each side, all the other countries also got involved. And then each of these countries had colonies scattered around the world. So the war would be extended to those regions too.

India was a colony of the British empire at the time of World War I. So nearly a million and a half Indians were forced to fight the war on the British side. Lots of Indians went to battlefronts in places like France, Belgium, East Africa, or Mesopotamia (today's Iran-Iraq). Not just the armed forces, another half a million Indians went to do tasks ranging from carrying loads to building roads. Many *lascars* from Bengal sailed on various ships. There's even a memorial stone for them near Prinsep Ghat in Kolkata. As we've seen, all wars need pawns in the front row. Soldiers, porters, boatmen—all

of these are nothing but pawns. A 6,000-strong force of Bengalis was created, the 59th Bengal Regiment. They were in Mesopotamia from 1917 to 1922. The poet and writer Kazi Nazrul Islam was part of this regiment. Nearly 11,000 Indians died at the time in Mesopotamia alone. It's so strange when you come to think of it—the war was being fought between two groups of countries in distant Europe, but so many Indians died in it.

Still, there were no direct signs of World War I in Bengal. In 1939, World War II broke out, and this time the impact was felt directly in Bengal and North-East India. As during World War I, a large number of countries were divided into two camps that fought each other. In Europe, Germany, Italy, and from Asia, Japan – they were on the same side. Japan began to eye the biggest British colony in Asia, India. Attacking from the East, the Japanese conquered Malay and Singapore, and then arrived in Burma. The war was now at the doorstep of Bengal and Assam. Kohima in Nagaland and Imphal in Mizoram were attacked. And then, in 1943, Japan bombed several places in Bengal, including 24 Parganas, Dunlop and Sahaganj, Noakhali, and Chattagram. Even parts of Calcutta were bombed.

A rhyme written at that time still makes us laugh:

> *Sa re ga ma pa dha ni*
> We've been bombed by the Japanese
> In their bombs are snakes that writhe
> Goodness gracious, say the Whites

The people of Bengal had to face great hardships because of World War II. Calcutta was bombed for the first time on the night of 20 December, 1942. Although there wasn't much damage, people were terrified. The kind of strange things the British began to do to protect the city from bombings made people even more fearful. Cowdung was smeared all over the Victoria Memorial, which was made of white marble, to prevent Japanese bomber planes from spotting it. It wasn't just Calcutta, panic spread across Madras too. The British administration feared that the cages in the zoo would be destroyed, allowing the animals to run free, if the Japanese bombed the city. So they actually killed a large number of the helpless creatures.

Worried that their cities could be bombed any time, residents of Calcutta, Bombay, and Madras began to leave in droves. It can be estimated from

various government documents and newspaper reports of the time that between two hundred thousand and three hundred thousand people tried to escape on foot from Calcutta. All important work almost came to a standstill. But then fleeing from cities in fear of bombs was hardly new. When the Japanese began bombing Burma, nearly six hundred thousand people ran away from there to India. They struggled across mountains and forests on foot in search of shelter. Some of them went towards Calcutta, while some found refuge in Assam and Tripura. It was the stories they brought with them that caused even greater panic across various cities of India. In Bengal, Assam, Tripura, Manipur, and, of course, Burma, everything became uncertain out of fear of Japanese attacks. That's what war is like. It doesn't end with firing on the frontline, it strikes at us in our daily lives.

The British were extremely annoyed when people began leaving Calcutta and other cities. But they didn't initially take many steps to protect residents. There were regular black-outs, however. This ensured that the nights were pitch dark, so that the pilots wouldn't be able to identify where to drop their bombs. All that the British here possessed to combat the Japanese air

force were a handful of anti-aircraft guns and eight fighter planes. There wasn't much hope of stopping the Japanese bomber planes with these. This was proved on 5 December, 1943. The Japanese bombed Calcutta in broad daylight that day. Still, the panic about bombs was far greater than the actual damage they caused. The real assault came from another quarter, when the bombings were followed by a devastating famine.

Historians have calculated that the famine of 1943 (also known as the 'famine of fifty' because the Bengali year was 1250) led to the death of nearly three million people. A sizeable portion of the rice consumed in Bengal used to come from Burma. The war had blocked the passage of this rice. Also, the British government had begun storing grains to ensure a steady supply of food for soldiers and factory workers during the war. So the amount of food available in the market for common people was reduced. When the supply of a product drops, its price jumps. Added to this was the British policy of scorched earth, adopted on the assumption that the Japanese were certain to invade Bengal. The principle behind this policy was that everything along the road that the enemy would take should be destroyed, so that there was no food for them during their march. Russia had followed

the same policy during Napoleon's and Hitler's invasions. But the policy led to further shortages for the people of Bengal. And as I've mentioned before, the British had also destroyed their boats to prevent the Japanese from making incursions through the waterways. Millions of people died as a result from the extreme paucity of food. The primary theatre of the war was Europe, but it led to a famine in faraway Bengal, because of which so many people died helplessly.

World War II ended in 1945, but war never seems to end in this world. Soon after this another war began, starting in 1945 and going on to 1990. This war, between the Soviet Union and the United States, was known as the Cold War. Let me take this opportunity to tell you more about the Cold War. It was a most unusual war. The Soviet Union and the United States didn't fight with each other directly, but there were constant attempts by both sides to go one better. It was like a war being fought underground. After the end of World War II, these two became the most powerful countries in the world, and were therefore called superpowers. The ideologies and politics that these two countries believed in were completely different from each other. Americans supported capitalism, while the Soviets were believers of

socialism. Both had the objective of getting other countries in the world to join them, using whatever means possible. The more countries either of the two had on their side, the more powerful they would be. So they lent money or sold arms to various countries in a bid to win them over. Sometimes, when two countries were at war, these superpowers often interfered so that they could get ahead of each other. Let's say a war has broken out between Country A and Country B. Now if the USA decided to help A and gain their support, the USSR would promptly make sure to help B.

Just like Country A and Country B, there was a war between India and Pakistan in 1971. It was fought across India's borders with Pakistan in West Bengal, Assam, and Tripura, in present-day Bangladesh. Not that there was a country named Bangladesh when the war began. The region was part of Pakistan, called East Pakistan. The Bengalis who lived here declared war at that time, seeking to separate from Pakistan. India supported this demand. This was what led to war between the two countries. The war for independent Bangladesh is known in history as the *Mukti Juddho*, the Liberation War. Now since the two superpowers would poke their nose everywhere, it was no surprise that they got involved here as well. Besides,

the USA was a friend of Pakistan's in that period. And then they were on good terms with China too. If both the USA and China had stepped up to help Pakistan, India would not have been able to match them. In fact, India might not even have joined the war in that case. The USA had even decided to despatch a fleet of battleships to the Bay of Bengal. Pushed into a tight corner, India on its part signed a pact with the USSR, who immediately fired a warning: if the USA sent their ships, the USSR wouldn't sit back and watch. Eventually the two superpowers didn't do anything, perhaps because they did not want to go to war against each other. But it became evident during the Liberation War that no war is a local one in this day and age.

4. The Liberation War

The Liberation War was an unusual one. To trace the reasons for it we have to go back to 1947. Our country became independent that year, and British India was partitioned. The country we now know of as Pakistan was called West Pakistan at the time. And Bengal was split to create East Pakistan. Now, the Partition may have taken place in that manner, but relations between West Pakistan and East Pakistan weren't very good. This can be gauged from various documents, newspapers, diaries, and memoirs from the period between 1947 and 1971. Although the newly formed country of Pakistan consisted of two segments, West Pakistan behaved as though it was the ruler. But then it was the kind of ruler who didn't stand by East Pakistan in times of trouble, or so the people of East Pakistan felt. For instance, when India and Pakistan were at war over Kashmir in 1965, the people of East Pakistan found the country's entire armed forces stationed in West Pakistan. No one was concerned about the fate of East Pakistan. In 1970, again, they saw that although millions were affected by Cyclone Bhola in East Pakistan, the country's government in West Pakistan didn't care at

all. Pakistan's annual budget would be drawn up every year in a way to benefit West Pakistan only. Even the profits from the jute cultivated in East Pakistan were pocketed by West Pakistan. This was like the fairy tale of the fortunate queen and the wretched queen, the *shuorani* and *duorani*. One is given a palace to live in, and the other, a tiny hut. All told, there was endless discord between the two parts of the same country. Moreover, not just the ministers and leaders of West Pakistan but even a section of the people there looked down on the Bengali-speaking citizens of East Pakistan. Even the practice of eating fish and rice instead of rotis was considered a failing of the people in the east. Naturally, the Bengalis of East Pakistan were not going to be happy at this behaviour of the people from West Pakistan.

The greatest trouble arose from the imposition of Urdu instead of giving Bengali the status of Pakistan's national language. At a session of the constitution assembly of Pakistan on 23 February 1948, Dhirendranath Dutta had said on behalf of East Pakistan that since 40 million of the 70 million people of Pakistan spoke Bengali, it was Bengali that should be the national language. Mohammad Ali Jinnah and Liaqat Ali Khan, the first Governor General and Prime Minister, respectively, of Pakistan could not

accept this proposition. Their plan was to unite the people of East Pakistan and West Pakistan with Urdu. At this, the Bengalis of East Pakistan, be they Muslims or Hindus, were furious. On 21 February, 1952, an enormous procession went out on the streets of Dhaka to agitate for the rights of the Bengali language. The police fired on it, killing five students. The uncompromising protests of the people of East Pakistan finally led to both Urdu and Bengali becoming the national languages of Pakistan. But the residents of East Pakistan realised that although their language had been given this position, they themselves would never enjoy the same rights or have the same opportunities as those who lived in West Pakistan.

In the 1970 elections, the popular East Pakistani political leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's Awami League won the largest number of seats across all of Pakistan. Pakistan's president Yahya Khan refused to allow the East Pakistani leader to become the Prime Minister of Pakistan. The people of East Pakistan were aggravated beyond measure. On 7 March, 1971, came Mujibur Rahman's call, 'The struggle this time is the struggle for liberation.' This was a call for separating from Pakistan to establish the independent country of Bangladesh. The leaders from West Pakistan saw no other option but to

send the army in. On the night of 25 March, 1971, West Pakistani soldiers launched Operation Searchlight, attacking the biggest city in East Pakistan, Dhaka, as well as several other places. Mujibur Rahman was arrested the same night. And immediately after this, General Ziaur Rahman, an army general who supported the formation of Bangladesh, declared on the radio that the people of East Bengal would go to war against West Pakistan to demand the formation of independent Bangladesh. It took some more time, however, to build the Mukti Bahini or the Liberation Army. On April 10, the soldiers of East Pakistan Rifles and of East Bengal regiment, along with a semi-military force called the Ansar, and thousands of ordinary women and men of all ages came together to form the Liberation Army. The Liberation War was underway.

An enormous number of common people died in this war. And millions escaped to take shelter in India across the border. It wasn't possible for India to take the responsibility for nearly 10 million people. So although India had supported the freedom struggle from the beginning, it began to think of ways to end the war quickly and send all the refugees back home. India's prime minister at the time, Indira Gandhi, travelled to countries

like the USA, France, and the USSR to inform them of the plight of the refugees and the freedom fighters. She lobbied with them to help end the war speedily and declare Bangladesh independent. In Bangladesh, too, the leaders wanted India to join the war directly and bring it to a swift end.

But why did India support the Liberation War from the very beginning? There were not only political compulsions but also the question of humanitarianism. India's relations with Pakistan had been hostile ever since 1947, so having enemies on both the eastern and western borders was a source of worry. If India helped Bangladesh get independence, the new country could be assumed to be an ally. That would mean there would be nothing more to fear on the eastern border. And then there was always the question of humanitarian action. India wanted to take a stand against the oppression of the people in East Pakistan. Besides, the country couldn't continue taking the pressure of giving shelter to 10 million refugees. But even before entering the war formally, India had begun helping the pro-Bangladeshis in various ways, such as providing sanctuary to the leaders of the movement who had escaped from there, or making room for an interim Bangladesh government in Kolkata. A radio station was set up as

well. Named Swadhin Bangla Betaar Kendra (Free Bangla Radio Station), this Bengali language station inspired people on both sides of the border with music, news, plays, and other programmes.

To Pakistan, the Liberation War was a civil war. They fought to prevent the country from splitting into two. It was a battle for seizing power between opposing forces within the country. But when India poked its nose into these affairs from outside, Pakistan decided not to take it lying down. In anger their planes attacked Rajasthan, Jammu, and Punjab on 3 December, 1971. Now India was directly involved in war. Alongside the battles on the western front, Indian forces also entered East Pakistan along with the Liberation Army on 6 December, 1971. So the Liberation War for Bangladesh eventually turned into a war between India and Pakistan. Pakistan lost this war, and on 15 December, 1971, India's parachute forces entered Dhaka along with Liberation Army soldiers practically without resistance. The war ended, and a peace treaty was signed in Dhaka on 16 December. Independent Bangladesh was born.

5. A report card of wars

All that I have told you about the Liberation War may make you think this is a thrilling good versus evil story from the movies. But real war is never as black and white. Quite a large number of people in East Pakistan were not in agreement with the Liberation Army's demand for an independent country. Among them were both Bengalis and non-Bengalis. Most of the non-Bengalis had moved there from Bihar at the time of the Partition. Because they spoke a different language and conducted themselves differently, many had begun to consider them anti-Bangladesh. It was true that some of these people did in fact want to go on living in Pakistan. Some of them even joined one of the two pro-Pakistan squads, Al-Badr and Al-Shams, that were engaged in killing members of the Liberation Army, intellectuals, and even common people. But it wasn't just the people from Bihar who were involved in such activities, so were some Bengalis. Still, as they say, give a dog a bad name and hang it. The migrants from Bihar found themselves in this situation because everyone else considered them the enemy in the first place. The Liberation

Army soldiers had attacked them even before the war began. Thousands of people from Bihar died during the war. The people of Bangladesh remained furious with the Bihari immigrants even afterwards, with the new country refusing to acknowledge them as citizens. But Pakistan didn't take them in either. Nearly three hundred thousand people originally from Bihar are scattered between shelter camps across Bangladesh today, living more or less without any rights. Even after wars that appear just or necessary when seen from the outside have ended, the anger and violence do not go away. And sometimes they even lead to another war.

Then there is the cost of war. All wars are hugely expensive, and the lion's share of the money is spent on destructive activities. Calculated according to today's prices, World War II cost four trillion dollars. Or, Rs 327313400000000! The same money could have been spent for so many useful purposes—schools, hospitals, factories, farming. And the effect of such expenditure is not limited only to the people living at that time, it takes many years more, sometimes decades, to cope with its impact. And it's not just a matter of expenses, so many people die helplessly. As I said before, the

scale of death and destruction increased greatly from World War I onwards. The new technique of warfare back then was to drop bombs from planes and reduce entire cities to dust. The range of weapons has become even more deadly today. Humans have invented horrifying missiles which can be used to destroy a city thousands of miles away just by pressing a button. It takes a very long time to build a civilisation, but a war can end it in an instant.

And yet we cannot imagine the world today without armies, arms, or ammunition. Wars are still being waged, either in self-defence, or to snatch something away from someone. Beyond the logic and arguments, the good and the bad of war, there is another tally of gains and losses to be calculated. Take the arms business. The more wars there are, irrespective of who loses, businesspeople only make more profits. And for the international superpowers, war is almost a necessity to retain their thrones. If wars beak out regularly, countries like these gain politically and become more powerful globally.
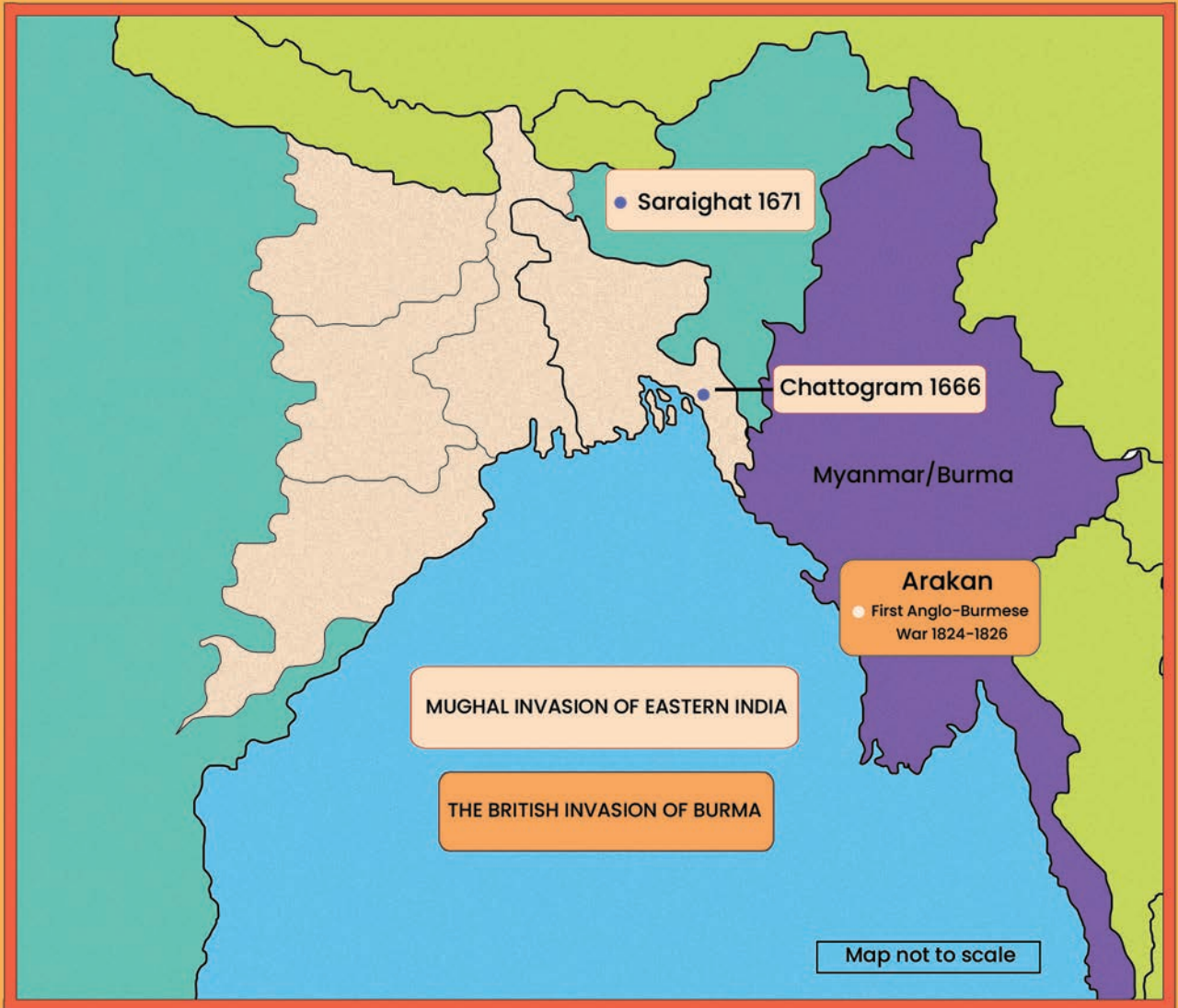
But amidst all of this, there is another kind of war too. The war against war. Ever since World War I in particular, humans have begun developing anti-war sentiments. No one had ever seen death, destruction and common people's despair on such a scale before. Every successive war after that seemed to expand till it covered the entire world. The destructive power of weapons increased manyfold. The expenses and damage grew so much as a result that many began to talk of halting war altogether. The League of Nations was established after the end of World War I to ensure there was never such a gigantic war again. The objective of the League was to settle disputes between different countries before they could grow into full-fledged war. The League failed for various reasons. The losses incurred during World War II surpassed anything ever seen before. Now the United Nations was set up to prevent any more wars. We can see for ourselves that wars have not stopped, but people have not yet given up hope. Artists and writers, musicians and ordinary people all continue to oppose war in their own ways.
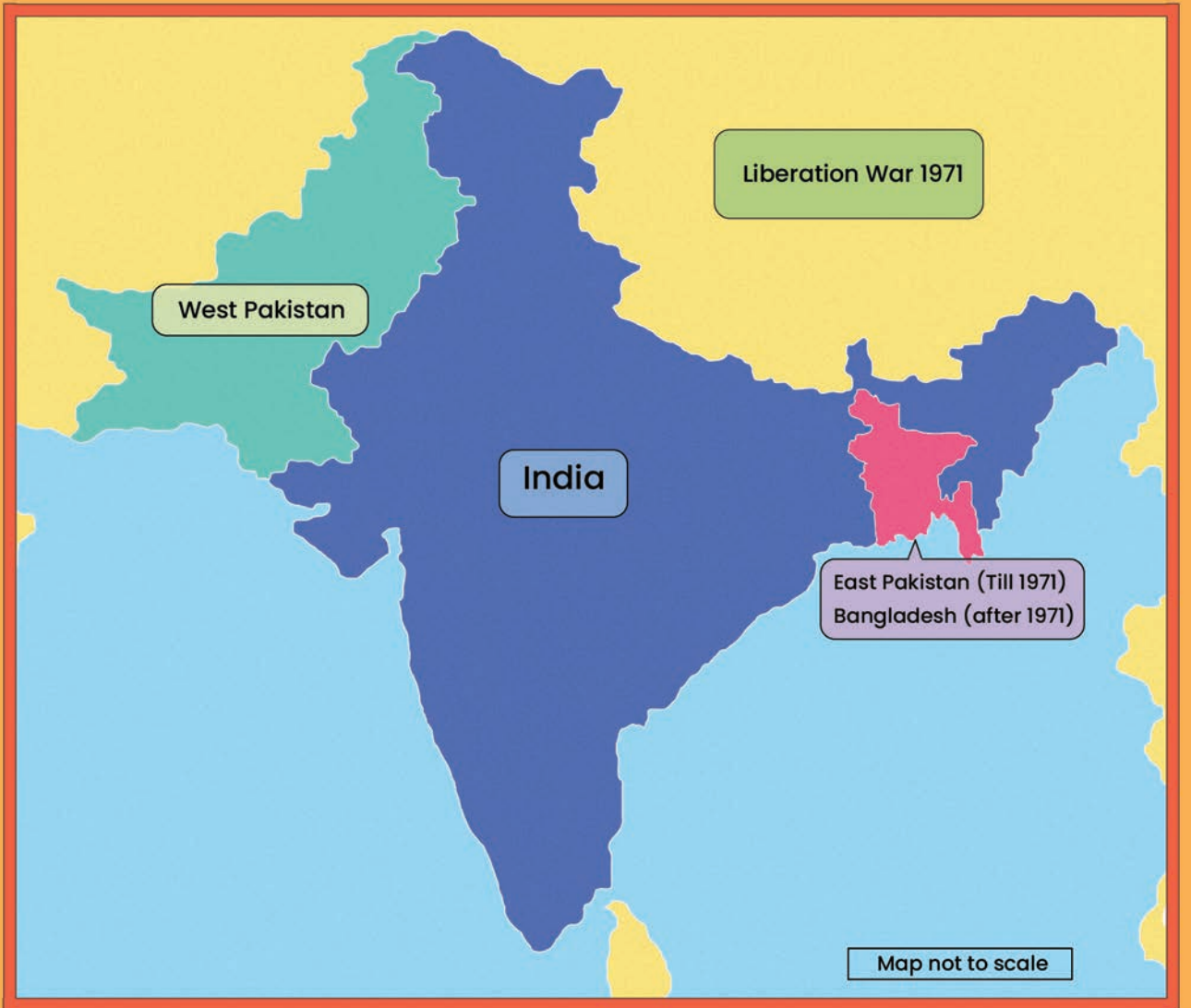
Let me tell you about the Vietnam War in this context. Pincered by the

Cold War, Vietnam was split into two. To gain independence and to unite, they fought for almost twenty years with, first, France, and then the USA. Many people spoke up against the US occupation of Vietnam. Even the citizens of America questioned their own government. Great artists like Bob Dylan, Pete Seeger or John Lennon sought peace through their music and poetry. Students in schools and colleges and universities protested against war. The flow of anti-war songs, poems, stories, and films began to move people. Vietnam was not an exception. During the war in Bangladesh, George Harrison and Pandit Ravi Shankar gathered a number of musicians to perform with them at the Concert of Bangladesh in New York, USA. They wanted to inform everyone of the plight of the people of Bangladesh during the Liberation War. But opposition to war was not limited to America and Europe. In India, too, many sought peace through art. One of them was the renowned film-director and writer Satyajit Ray. At the end of his film *Goopy Gyne, Bagha Byne*, we see Goopy and Bagha have stopped the army of the king of Halla in their tracks and are asking them what use it is to go to war. In their words:

Why take up arms needlessly
To lose your lives helplessly
When state fights state there is despair
What use is it, tell me, going to war?

This is the question the history of war makes us face. What use is it to go to war? Who gains? Who loses? When you play your war games on your mobiles or video consoles, don't forget that people like you and me have lost the most from war. There haven't been too many gains. History stands witness.

Saraighat 1671

Chattogram 1666

Myanmar/Burma

Arakan
First Anglo-Burmese
War 1824-1826

MUGHAL INVASION OF EASTERN INDIA

THE BRITISH INVASION OF BURMA

Map not to scale

6. Complicated words and concepts

Subahdar   A states under the Mughal Empire were called *Subah* or *Suba*. The principal ruler in each of these was known as the *Subahdar*.

Guerilla   An unorthodox form of fighting. Guerilla wars often take place in remote forests. Guerilla warriors use the environment or geographic features to their advantage. After covertly attacking opponents who have superior strength, they either hide in the forest or melt into a crowd of ordinary people.

Lascar   Indian sailors or deckhands were called by this name on European ships. They did everything from running the ship to loading and unloading ships.

Civil war   A type of war fought between two or more groups or factions within a particular country or nation. Civil wars often lead to two independent countries being formed from one. Or, sometimes one of the warring factions gains power.

Socialism	An idea or ideology for a society in which there will be no upper or lower classes, no rich or poor. Such a society will be free of oppression, and there will be no private ownership of the assets of the country or of society. All humans will have rights over all assets. Under this ideology, land, mines, factories, etc, are all controlled by the state.
Budget	Accounts of the government's income and expenditure. The Budget specifies what the government will spend money on and in what way.
Capitalism	An economic system in which farms, mines, factories, etc are run according to the owners' wishes. The primary objective of this system is to make as much profits as possible from production.
United Nations	An organisation created by several countries coming together in 1945 after the end of World War II. The objective of this organisation is to solve problems between two countries when they crop up—through discussion and dialogue, so that

war does is not declared. It also tries to help settle differences and end wars when they do break out.

Colonise/ Colony

When a powerful country occupies all or part of another country and establishes its own rule. India, for example, was a British colony for a long time.

USSR

Union of Soviet Socialist Republics was a union of fifteen republics spanning Eastern Europe, Eurasia and Central Asian regions. It existed between 1922 and 1991. In reality the members of the USSR were controlled by the authorities based in Russia.

7. And finally

You must be wondering where I got all these stories about wars that I've written about. I had to go through a bunch of books, articles, and websites to write this. The thing is, you can't make up things when writing history. You have to check all kinds of books and documents. And that's where the real joy of history lies. So let me tell you about some of the things I read while writing this book.

I read about the Mughals' military expeditions in Bengal and Assam, and the connections between war and nature and the environment, in three books: Pratyay Nath's *Climate of Conquest: War, Environment*, and *Empire in Mughal North India*, Byomkesh Tripathi and Srishtidhar Dutta's *Martial Traditions of North East India*, and Kaushik Roy's *Small Wars, Ecology, and Imperialism in Precolonial South Asia: A case study of Mughal-Ahom Conflict, 1615–1682*.

I learnt about the invasion of the Bargis in Jogendra Nath Samaddar's essay "The Bargi Invasion of Bengal" and in Stewart N. Gordon's book *Marathas, Marauders & State Formation in Eighteenth Century India*.

To know more about the war between the British and the kings of Burma, I read G P Ramchandra's *The Outbreak of the First Anglo Burmese War* and Oliver Pollock's *The Origins of the Second Anglo-Burmese War*.

I found out how India and Bengal were linked with World War II from Radhika Singha's book *The Coolie's Great War: Indian Labour in a Global Conflict, 1914–1921* and a fine blog post by Ahmed Ullah titled *Remembering the Bengali Contribution During the First World War* (blogs.lse.ac.uk/southasia).

David Lockwood's *Calcutta Under Fire: The Second World War Years* and Indivar Kamketkar's *The Shiver of 1942 talks of World War II and Japan's bombing of India*. From Janam Mukherjee's *Hungry Bengal: War, Famine and the End of Empire*, I learnt of the terrible famine of 1943.

I read the history of the Liberation War of Bangladesh in Mohidul Hasan's *Muldhara 71* (Mainstream 71), Anam Zakaria's *1971: A People's History from Bangladesh, Pakistan and India*, and Srinath Raghavan's *1971: A Global History of the Creation of Bangladesh*.

The names of some people and places in the book may seem unfamiliar to you. Let me tell you more about them.

1. Vietnam: A small country in south-east Asia. It was once a colony of France and then of Japan. Although they became independent after World War II under Ho Chi Minh's leadership, the USA and the USSR split the country into two during the Cold War. Eventually, after nearly twenty years of war, Vietnam was reunited and became fully independent in 1975.

2. Hiroshima and Nagasaki: Two cities in Japan. In 1945, the USA dropped atom bombs on Hiroshima on 6 December and on Nagasaki on 9 December.

3. Bob Dylan: American singer and poet. He has sung numerous songs about politics and society. In 2016 he was given the Nobel Prize for literature. If you get a chance, do listen to his song *Blowin' in the Wind* (https://youtu.be/MMFj8uDubsE).

4. Pete Seeger: American folk singer and social worker. He sang of the suffering, deprivation and rights of people all over the world. This great artist died in 2014. You could try listening to his song *Where Have All The Flowers Gone* (https://youtu.be/PS3-lyqCl80)

5. John Lennon: Legendary rock musician from England. The band he co-founded in the 1960s, The Beatles, are still extremely popular. He moved to the USA afterwards. That was where he sang of peace. He was assassinated in 1980. One of his most extraordinary songs is *Imagine* (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YkgkThdzX-8).

6. George Harrison: A member of The Beatles, along with John Lennon. One of the greatest rock guitarists and singers of all time. He died in 2001. You can listen to his Concert for Bangladesh, which he organised with the iconic sitarist Ravi Shankar (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tby39qh9Lts).

About the Author, Translator and the Artists

Santanu Sengupta has written this book. He teaches history at Polba Mahavidyalaya.

Arunava Sinha has translated this book into English. He is a literary translator and Associate Professor of creative writing at Ashoka University.

Wasim Helal has done the art direction, cover and maps for this book. He is a graphic designer by profession. Wasim does illustrations, covers and art direction for many Indian and foreign publishers.

The art in this book are by Ranjit Chitrakar and Sirajudaulla Chitrakar. By family tradition they are *pata* artists—those who make art on fabric. Ranjit and Shiraz work in the village of Naya, which is under the jurisdiction of Pingla police station in the West Medinipur district of West Bengal. Following the tradition of *pata* art, they primarily paint narratives and compose songs about Hindu gods and goddesses. But these days their art covers other themes too. *Pata* art is an example of the tradition of religious harmony in Bengal. Although the artists are often Muslims, their art and lyrics are usually centred on stories of Hinduism. What's more, according to their own social narrative, they are descendants of the Hindu god Viswakarma. This is how Islam and Hinduism is blended in their lives and work.

The Institute of Development Studies Kolkata (IDSK) was set up in 2002 by the Government of West Bengal as an autonomous centre of excellence in social sciences. It is a society with an autonomous governing body with eminent scholars and Government's nominees. IDSK is recognized for its advanced academic research and informed policy advice in the areas of literacy, education, health, gender, employment, technology, communication, human sciences and economic development. The academic programmes at IDSK include MPhil (2006-2022) and PhD in social sciences and short training courses for research scholars. It offers state-of-the-art IT and library facilities to its students and research scholars. It is fully funded by the Government of West Bengal. IDSK has been recognized by the ICSSR under the category of "ICSSR Recognized Research Institutes".

The Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung (RLS) is a German political foundation that is part of the democratic socialist movement. True to the legacy of its namesake Rosa Luxemburg (1871-1919), it stands in solidarity with the workers' and women's rights movements. the organization serves as a forum for debate and critical thinking about political alternatives, as well as research centre for social development. The RLS has close ties to the German party DIE LINKE. RLS provides political education and a centre for advanced social research in both Germany and throughout the world. RLS is one of six party-affiliated political foundations in Germany; it supports partners in over 80 countries striving for social justice, strengthening public participation, and social ecological development.

How do you learn history while keeping your eyes and ears open? What does it mean to be conscious of history? The series 'First History Lessons' was born from the search for answers to these questions. Each of the books is on a unique subject. The text is accompanied by pictures drawn by patachitra artists. The objective of this book is to explain, simply, various periods and various complex ideas in history. After reading these books, children will learn to ask questions—that is our hope.