

BOOKS

Madhu Bhaduri's 'Lived Stories': A Concise, Varied Narrative of Her Storied Career as Diplomat

Straying from her familiar world of fiction, the former Indian Foreign Service officer's book offers an authentic look into her life as a diplomat, mother and founding member of the AAP.



Madhu Bhaduri. Photo: Facebook/Inddiplomats



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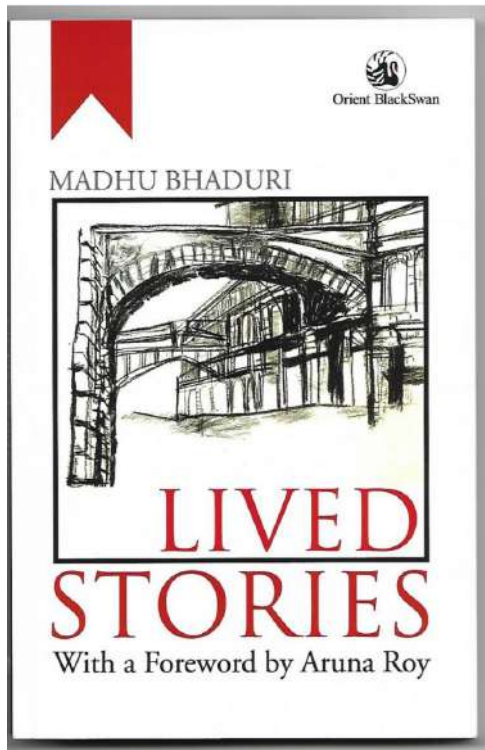


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Madhu Bhaduri wears an enviable number of feathers in her large cap: a remarkable career as a diplomat, starting as an apprentice Indian Foreign Service (IFS) officer in 1968 and ending as ambassador to Lisbon in 2003; author of four very telling novels in Hindi as well

as many short stories; practitioner of Indian classic music; mother to two daughters and, not least, a founding member of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) along with Arvind Kejriwal, Prashant Bhushan and Yogendra Yadav, only quitting it when she found that it was unable to keep the promises it had made to the people of India.

Now she has given us a slim, beautiful narrative of extremely varied true stories from the world she had inhabited for nearly four decades: the world of diplomacy. The title, *Lived Stories*, attests to the verity of the tales she has told, set part from the world of fiction, which is also her familiar home.



Madhu Bhaduri
Lived Stories
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The tales, naturally, vary with the location of her posting, from the initial comfortable ones like Vienna – where she was posted twice; a city she loved for its patronage of music – to Vietnam in 1975, on the brink of the flight of the world's domineering superpower in defeat and humiliation at the hands of the tiny Southeast Asian country.

Vietnam was a place where a bicycle was the only vehicle available to all the 'Excellencies', the ambassadors posted there; where even procuring rice was a privilege; where, on a second, personal visit forty years later, Bhaduri was witness to lush green fields where, earlier, she seen the massive, desolate craters left behind by American bombs in a quest to bringing democracy to a people who had demonstrated the victory of the human will over all the destruction American bombs could wreak.

The range of her experiences is fascinating, related movingly with subtle humour, irony

and, above all, humanity.

As a young officer, Bhaduri was commissioned to take care of a VVIP guest who, she was warned, was extremely haughty, ill-tempered and supercilious: the twin-sister of the Shah of Iran. When the eminent guest had settled down in her apartment in Rashtrapati Bhawan, Bhaduri went to check if everything was in place.

Everything was, indeed, in place except for the fact that there was not a single thread in place on Her Imperial Highness' body. Soon, lower ranking officials went to serve her tea and rushed back in horror to report the state of her attire. They were, of course, reluctant to serve her but Her Highness obviously thought all of them too menial to be taken note of. However, the young trainee IFS officer had developed her diplomatic skills early and managed to persuade her staff to continue with their duties.

In Lithuania and Belarus, Bhaduri was made India's ambassador to both neighbouring countries simultaneously. Here, she came face-to-face with the realities of desperate Indians, especially from Punjab, seeking a start to better life as undocumented immigrants in Europe after falling into the hands of fraudulent travel operators. The misery of these immigrants stirred the dormant activist in her.

Her satisfaction was immense when she was able to rescue around 300 of these starving, helpless and hopeless young men and send them back home. Some of them have kept in

touch with her after they started their new life at home. There is even a picture of one such man in the book, looking happy with his family.

At Minsk, Bhaduri also promoted Indian music and theatre, her second passion. It was a precious legacy she left behind. In Mexico, however, it was her school-going daughter, Rakhi, who left a sort of legacy behind when, in the school bus, two young, Dutch boys accosted her and her younger sister screaming “Black, Black, Black”. In response, Rakhi gave one of the boys a huge slap and shouted “White, White, White”. The whole busload of children, led by the driver, burst into applause and cheered for her, hailing her as a “hero”. The story was told for days in the school and in the neighbourhood. When the time came for Madhu to move to another posting, the driver came with a box of chocolates for her daughters.

Bhaduri’s diplomatic career ended a bit dramatically in 2003. The don Abu Salem and his girlfriend Monica Bedi were in Portugal and the Atal Bihari Vajpayee government was determined to have him extradited to India. Bhaduri, as ambassador to Lisbon, tried her skills to expedite the extradition but was informed that the Portuguese government was powerless to help; extradition had to follow the due process of law in court.

The government at home found this too cumbersome and L.K. Advani, the erstwhile home minister, thought a letter from him to the foreign minister of Portugal would overcome the legal hurdles. Advani was so sure that this would do the trick that a high-power delegation, led by a senior CBI official, flew to Lisbon to pick up the don only to return empty handed. In the end, Salem and Bedi did get extradited after the court laid it down that he would not be awarded the death penalty. Salem is still in prison.

Bhaduri’s retirement from the service did not lead to retirement from action. India was soon in ferment with massive agitations against the greatly hyped allegations of large-scale corruption. There was also the demand for a Right to Information Act. Bhaduri plunged into it along with her old friend and colleague Aruna Roy – who has written a very moving foreword to this book.

Subsequently, Bhaduri joined hands with other leading figures in the agitation that led to the founding of AAP. However, the charm did not last long as the gap between promise and reality began to stare her in the face. She quit the party with a public announcement of her disappointment, which **received a good amount of media coverage**.

The stories compiled in this charming book were first published in Hindi, which seems to be the author’s first love, in the venerable journal *Hans*. It was inevitable that the demand for its translation into English would lead her to give that precious gift to readers. Written in the simplest language – which is also a trademark of her writing in Hindi – her own simple and firm commitment to the constitution of India and to universal human values stands out.

Confession: Over five decades of close friendship between Madhu Bhaduri’s family and mine has failed to turn us into enemies!

Harbans Mukhia is a former JNU faculty member.

