

## **A bus journey**

The travelers read the latest news about the civil war raging in their country, - the violent and fierce guerrilla warfare that had broken out without warning in the southern provinces. They read about the hand grenades lobbed at the army commandant's car, and the retreat of two armed divisions. The rebels had burned down no less than thirty seven villages in the south in one fearful night. It was suspected that British paratroopers had been dropped in the hilly regions, and there had been an appeal to the United Nations. The absconding dictator had made a sensational announcement on the French television network. The International Red Cross society had again started providing doctors and medicines. And the situation was alarming , - so much so that it was apprehended that a Third World War might break out at any moment. ....

The sound of a huge blast startled the passengers, and the driver brought the bus to a screeching halt. The road ahead was blanketed by a thick cloud of smoke. Three army trucks blocked the road. A smell of gunpowder spread through the interior of the bus, and young boys in army attire jumped down swiftly from the trucks. One of them, who appeared to be stronger than the others, started talking excitedly to them, gesturing vigorously with his hands. It was clear from his uniform that he was their captain. ....

It was impossible for guerrillas to hide in this part of the road, - there were no jungles, only flat open fields on both sides of the road. In the distance could be seen the boundaries of a village and some hills. So the bomblast could not have been the handiwork of guerillas. The hills in front were rough and broken, and army trucks were moving continuously on the road. It also seemed unlikely that guerillas would hide in the hills. Even if they could hide there, would it be worth their while to do so? There was a railway track running along the top of the bank on one side of the road. This connected to the town. Moreover, a railway bridge was being constructed at the turning of the main highway. Of course, it might be helpful to the guerrillas if they could blow up the bridge and the railway line. But this hill was not a convenient hiding place, from where they could emerge and carry out their work of destruction. Of course, they might have planned to bomb and destroy the road, because then, the army camp located about two miles away, would be completely cut off from the town. But they would surely realize that to attempt such a thing in broad daylight would be suicidal. If they were caught, - as surely they would be, - the entire guerrilla outfit, their entire insurgent movement, would be in danger. Besides, even if this road was bombed, there was another route, longer and more circuitous no doubt, by which the army could approach the town. It was also possible that the rebels were planning to attack the telephone exchange and the radio station, which were situated on the other side of the army camp.

The curtain of smoke confronting the bus was gradually thinning down, but the army trucks, the other vehicles, the heavily laden civil trucks, and the soldiers, completely obstructed the scene in front. There were also a large number of big steel pipes piled up on both sides of the road, one on top of the other, - probably a half hearted attempt of the rebels to set up some kind of barricade, I thought, - that were hampering the free flow of traffic at this point. I also noticed that someone had dug up both sides of the road, where they might be planning to plant mines or booby traps. Or, who knows, maybe mines and booby traps had already been hidden inside these dug up holes.

The passengers of the bus craned their necks and looked fearfully out of the windows, not understanding what was happening. The driver, I noticed, had not stopped the engine. A thunderous sound could be heard in the distance, as though hundreds of boulders were tumbling down the mountainside. Looking back, I saw that a long line of cars had lined up behind our bus, their windscreens sparkling in the sunlight, and the drivers blowing their horns impatiently. The windscreen of our bus too was shining in the bright sunlight. A portion of it had smashed, and there were five small holes in it. It was not difficult to understand that speeding bullets had pierced through the glass.

At the same time, a train sped past, blowing its earsplitting whistle as it went its way towards to the town. For a few seconds the noise of the train drowned out all other sounds. The coaches were jam packed with people, old and young, men, women and children. There were people hanging on to the coach handles too. For a short time, the clouds of dense black smoke emanating from the engines covered everything around.

This was a picture we had seen often enough, - in the newspapers, on the news reel, and even with our own eyes. A scene of terrified and panicky people, fleeing for their lives from bombed out towns and villages, driven out of hearth and home by the wanton destruction of mindless rebels and civil war. I thought to myself, that indeed, it was not surprising that in such a situation, the youth of the country rushed to join the armed forces, forgetting their studies and jobs. And, I wondered whether there was anything I should do, - or could do, - at this point in time. What could I do? I felt that it was not improbable that, leaving my normal and stereotyped life with my co- passengers, I might rise to become the spokesman of the masses, and thus rise to the front page headlines of news! I frowned, and decided that I would immediately jump down from the bus, and going to the driver, would tell him.....

But at that very moment, a man clad in khaki half pants and wearing a red turban, appeared in the front, and started waving a green flag. The drivers came and took their seats, and the cars started moving forward, passing by groups of labourers busy in their work of road construction. Controlling a deep sigh, I tried to concentrate once again on my newspaper, and tried to get some sort of stimulus from the picture of the bearded rebel leader of South America

But by this time, the work of dynamiting the nearby hills for broadening the Guwahati - Jhalukbari road was over, and we were signaled to pass on. The three trucks carrying the NCC cadets generously let us pass ahead, while the Pandu- Guwahati shuttle disappeared from sight. Glancing back, I saw that some small children from the nearby village were happily playing on top of the steel pipes that I had taken to be barricades. The bearded leader's picture did not seem all that important any more. Indeed, it appeared rather out of place, and even strange. I now scanned the newspaper to see whether there was any news about the struggle reigning in our own state, whether any of our local leaders had announced anything new, any bright idea (for example, like promoting the ideal of *Bhoo daan* against rampant bloodshed, for example!). However that may be, the daily routine bus trip from Guwahati to Jhalukbari had become such a very tedious and stereotyped experience, that I could not but be grateful to the ramshackle old bus for stimulating my imagination, - so much so that I could even envision its broken old front glass with its many holes and cracks, to be the windscreen of a bus in a war zone ripped by the deadly bullets of some terrorist militia!