

## What wars and ‘war bodies’ know about international relations

Swati Parashar  
Monash University

**Abstract** *What happens when the ‘international’ as a distinct social space is approached from the perspective of war rather than war from the perspective of the ‘international’? Tarak Barkawi’s question (Millennium, 39:3, 2011, 701–706) is best answered by attempts to understand war not as part of inter/intra-state relations but as a socio-cultural, trans-historical institution that impacts on the ‘everyday’ lives of men, women and children. In this article I argue that war is not a disruption of the ‘everyday’, an abstraction that has a definite beginning and end, something we enter into and exit. Instead, it can be captured in daily and mundane lived experiences of people and in powerful emotions that constitute ‘self’, community and the ‘other.’ Drawing upon my research on wars in South Asia, I particularly reflect on how war shapes the banal and the fervent and how cultural and political narratives of ‘war bodies’ perform the ‘international’ in a variety of ways. Most significantly I want to draw attention to how international relations as a scholarly discipline is so deeply engaged with war and yet seems to have an estranged relationship with it.*

### Introduction: the estranged relationship between international relations and war

A torn piece of fabric hung on an intact tamarind tree and an arm missing a body lay by the roadside, still wearing a watch. I realized that we were witnessing the aftermath of a tremendous explosion I had heard the night before. I remembered I had been woken up by an earth-shattering explosion, but I had soon dropped off to sleep again when I realized that it was someone else’s house that was under attack. (de Soyza 2011, 48)

Niromi de Soyza is not your average middle-class, university-employed, Sri Lankan Tamil migrant who lives in Australia. She calls herself an ‘ordinary, middle class, Catholic Sri Lankan Tamil’ girl, who served in the first female contingent of the LTTE<sup>1</sup> (the guerrilla militant group engaged in a brutal civil war with the Sri Lankan state from 1975 to 2009). Niromi provides her readers with an account of her war experiences and her daily life as an LTTE fighter in Sri Lanka in her book, *Tamil tigress* (2011). Niromi is neither a celebrated war heroine nor an

---

<sup>1</sup> This acronym stands for the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, who fought for a separatist Tamil homeland in the north and east of Sri Lanka. The LTTE was defeated in a civil war that lasted three decades and finally ended in May 2009 when the government security forces killed the LTTE chief Prabhakaran and other top leaders.

injured, despondent war 'victim'. She chose to opt out of the war after nearly a year of fighting and left the LTTE for a different life overseas first in India and then migrating to Australia with her family.

Niromi's autobiographical book written after two decades of war experience has earned her praise and criticism both. Those who approve are Tamil and Sinhalese moderates, the common people who understand and empathize with her war story. Those critical are scholars and journalists who have not only raised doubts about the authenticity of her story and the timing of its publication<sup>2</sup> but have suggested there are 'factual errors' that reveal her story to be fake, fictional and fabricated (Roberts 2011; Ambalavanar 2011). Some have gone to great lengths to prove that she is a Tiger apologist; others have labelled her a Sinhalese supporter. Her detractors have not only pointed out minutiae like her use of certain specific Tamil terms that, they believe, would not be used by someone so familiar with Sri Lanka, but have also ridiculed her desire to use a non de guerre to ensure her personal safety, and her decision not to reveal the real identities of characters she mentions in the book (Roberts 2011; Ambalavanar 2011). According to Niromi, some of the criticism has also been about her being a woman, for how could a tiny-framed, well-educated, Australia-based Tamil woman have an 'authentic' war story straight from the war zone with ambushes, dead bodies, AK-47s and Submachine Guns (SMG) in it.

The warring Niromi, her Tiger cohorts and the Tamil civilians in Sri Lanka in the late 1980s knew much more about the 'international' than the 'international' today professes to know about Niromi and the choices she made. They knew that all the 'peace talks between the militants, Tamil politicians and the government had led to nothing' and that war was their only option (de Soyza 2011, 61). They knew that many Tamils were more interested in migration to Australia, Canada or Europe, whose currencies they would then use to fund the war in Sri Lanka, fought by those who stayed back for the love of people and nation (2011, 93). They recognized that the silencing of gunshots and explosions did not mean peace and that the sounds, smells and sights of war would return (2011, 155, 168); the civilians knew that the war being fought by the Tigers 'for' them was not a war they wanted. This war had reduced them to being refugees in their own land (2011, 202).

Most international relations (IR) war scholars would not hear her war story or include it in their analysis of the Sri Lankan war. They would not think about war from her perspective. Instead, they would rely on obscure quantitative data and variables explaining the nature of civil wars or theorizing about other aspects of war where common people are not significant actors, but institutions and states are. The irony is that Niromi and her circle of friends and family know more about the 'international' and have experienced the international on their bodies in their geographical movements as asylum-seekers from a war-torn country to a developed one. Niromi herself has an intimate 'everyday' relationship with international relations, as a former guerrilla fighter of an armed ethnic group (referred to as a 'terrorist' group by most governments), a political asylum-seeker

---

<sup>2</sup> This book was published after the defeat of the LTTE and the killing of its top leadership in 2009. The questions asked of Niromi include why she did not write this book when the LTTE was powerful and when its leaders, particularly Prabhakaran, were alive (so that the 'authenticity' of her story could be verified).

who did not typically arrive in a boat, and as a South Asian migrant living in a Western country like Australia. International relations, on the other hand, does not know much about Niromi's war. International relations' war steadfastly refuses to acknowledge people, experiences and emotions. Many like Niromi de Soyza remain at the periphery of IR's war stories, unaccounted for, IR's lost war subjects, and more often completely missing.

IRs lost war subjects

This is further demonstrated by Sheba Chhachhi (2002), who draws our attention to the war images consistently produced in the media which 'normalize' the grand narrative of war. Writing about the armed militancy in Kashmir, she reflects on how images of destroyed buildings and shrines, confiscated arms and armed men were reproduced for public consumption. 'Dead men—mutilated bodies, charred flesh and unidentifiable "human remains"—occupy the space left over by armed men' (2002, 189). Chhachhi, more than a decade ago, was conscious of how, 'In this visual narrative, ordinary men, women and children are non actors, (or at best part of a supporting cast brought on stage as victims of militant violence) a de-peopled representation of Kashmir affirming its unambiguous construction in the popular imagination as territory' (2002, 190). Scholarly writings in IR are no different in this respect from media representations of war, privileging war stories with a degree of theatricality but with hardly any people in them.

Still preoccupied with inter- and intra-state wars, IR wants to know why wars happen and how they end. It is the period between these two moments that IR war studies has not seriously engaged with. People who fight/suffer/live inside wars do not worry about how wars begin and end (causes and consequences), for either they know the answers or know where to look for answers. Babu Singh<sup>3</sup> was an active participant in the Maoist insurgent wars in Bihar-Jharkhand in India from 1987, first as a political worker and later also as a fighter. When I met him for an interview in June 2011, he had surrendered to the Jharkhand police and was undergoing rehabilitation. He lived with his family in a small government-provided residence in the state of Jharkhand and under constant police protection and surveillance. His war against the state and on behalf of the marginalized poor had lost its meaning for him and he was inspired to surrender when he came across preachers from the Art of Living foundation, a yoga and meditation non-governmental organization (NGO) founded by spiritual guru Sri Sri Ravishankar. There were some others, Singh mentioned, who, influenced by the *sudarshan kriya* (breathing technique that relieves stress) of the Art of Living, abandoned the war path.<sup>4</sup>

Period between that IR does not seriously engage with

Those who enter into war also find ways to live with it and get out of it, as Niromi and Babu Singh have. Their exit strategies can include a simple resignation letter to the guerrilla group<sup>5</sup> or a motivational encounter with a yoga-meditation group. International relations' wars do not end quite that way. The explanations must lie in either a zero sum game for the states, or the warring groups reaching a state of fatigue, a resource crunch or a necessary ceasefire before further strategizing. And then there is Ranjini in Melbourne—a former LTTE



<sup>3</sup> Name changed to protect identity.

<sup>4</sup> Interview, June 2011.

<sup>5</sup> By her own admission, Niromi was able to leave the LTTE by writing a letter to them which they accepted. They even helped her reunite with her family.

fighter, a refugee, Sri Lankan Tamil, wife, mother and pregnant, now in detention for receiving an adverse security assessment from the Australian Security Intelligence Organization (ASIO). Ranjini experienced the war in Sri Lanka, where she cared for orphaned children and where her Tamil Tiger husband was killed.<sup>6</sup> Ranjini is IR's security story, the subject or object of its securitization conundrum. Her war experiences, her story of survival and the long boat journey to Australia from the coast of Sri Lanka do not find a place in the war narrative, but only in the refugee–security narrative. Niromi de Soyza, Babu Singh and Ranjini have many lessons for IR scholars. International relations pretends to be the innocent bystander that chooses not to know these people whose knowledge and experience would dismantle the edifice of war theorizing, a popular scholarly activity of IR. International relations, thus, has an intimate relationship with war<sup>7</sup> and yet the two seem to be estranged, few meaningful conversations taking place between them about the 'human body, a sensing physical entity that can touch war, and an emotional and thinking body that is touched by it in innumerable ways' (Sylvester 2011, 1).

### **'Everyday' living inside wars**

War does not appear extraordinary for the thousands of people who live inside wars and confront the gory images and the sight of blood and bodies on a daily basis. Maria Maslei who works with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Islamabad mentioned during a conversation that the Afghan refugees in Pakistan were not troubled by bomb explosions and dead bodies as much as by concerns of daily survival, food, shelter and employment.<sup>8</sup> Niromi de Soyza captures this pathos in her statement, 'we were better prepared for death than for life'.<sup>9</sup> The many theories of war have been unable to explain the daily occurrences in a war zone and have only served to uphold, for example, gendered stereotypes. As Carolyn Nordstrom aptly observes about war theories, 'Most reflected the same view of war ... silent women thronging roadways, never seen, while men fighting' (2005, 400). The most pertinent thing that has emerged in my war research and fieldwork in three war/conflict zones (Kashmir, Sri Lanka and the Maoist 'red corridor' in India) has been this idea of everyday lived experiences, captured extensively in the works of anthropologists such as Veena Das and Carolyn Nordstrom. (Das et al 2000; 2001; Das 2007; Nordstrom 1997; 2002; 2005). People live in wars, with wars, and war lives with them long after it ends. The South Asian wars I have studied are protracted wars with no definite exit and entry points. Wars begin in peace and there is peace in wars. Wars become a way of living and a daily performance in which there are willing and unwilling

<sup>6</sup> For details about Ranjini's story, see < <http://www.smh.com.au/opinion/political-news/asio-says-this-woman-is-a-threat-to-security-20130301-2fbnd.html> >, accessed 12 May 2013 and Gordon (2012).

<sup>7</sup> A large number of books, conferences and panels on IR remain focused on war, military strategy, and security.

<sup>8</sup> Maria is a personal friend who was visiting Australia in May 2009. We had some serious conversations about the intersections between her work as a UNHCR official who sees things on the ground and is an IR practitioner and mine as a student/teacher of IR.

<sup>9</sup> Niromi said this at a guest lecture at the University of Wollongong on 20 August 2012.

participants. Many men, women and children learn to live with war inside its immediate death, destruction and survival. In wars that are protracted and have lasted decades, there is life amidst death, survival amidst destruction, music, drums and celebration amidst sounds of explosions. The smell, taste, sounds, touch, pleasures and pains of war linger within and beyond the war.

Feminist scholarship in IR has started to think about war differently (for example: Sjöberg and Gentry 2007; Wibben 2011; MacKenzie 2012; Parashar 2009; 2011a; Sylvester 2005; 2011; 2013; Sylvester and Parashar 2008). These scholars have explored themes such as conjugal relations in war, women soldiers and militants, women's access to political violence, emotional experiences of 'doing' and also knowing war. The grand theme that unites all these works is the concept of the ordinary lives of the bodies in war who are involved in an intimate relationship with the 'everyday'. This point is further illustrated in the poignant documentary *My daughter: the terrorist*. This documentary was made by a Norwegian film-maker Beate Arnestad in 2005–2006 when she had access to two women suicide bombers (Black Tiger cadres) of the LTTE. The documentary captures the relationship between a mother, Antonia, and her guerrilla daughter, Dharshika. Talking to the interviewer, whose face we do not see anytime in the documentary, Antonia laments, 'the war and we lived together ... we lived inside war, we could not separate ourselves from the war'.

Antonia is a war mother who challenges the limits of IR war scholarship and perhaps asks us: how can you study war as causes and consequences, without understanding human experience and what war means to people? Antonia talks about her daughter as being closer to the guerrillas than to her, literally and metaphorically. War alters relationships, new relationships are fostered between bombs and guerrillas, and bodies take on a variety of new meanings: the martyr, the terrorist, the hero(ine), the collateral. Sylvester argues persuasively, 'war experiences come in prosaic, profound, sickening, excruciating, and exhilarating ways, to all kinds of people living inside and outside war zones. Experiences of war provide information about what it is, how it operates, who takes part, how they are affected and affecting, and what the politics of war looks like beyond the war rooms of state. To access those experiences takes more than good intentions and interest' (2011, 129).

Everyday war activity has many banal moments. Das (2007) states that our theoretical impulse is often to think of agency in terms of escaping the ordinary rather than a descent into it. This is often also the lens through which we look at those located within wars. The questions IR usually asks are about the extraordinary moments of war, the causality and impact. There is a reality in between and beyond that can be helpful not only to deconstructing the conditions under which war becomes inevitable and even a necessity, but also to post-war efforts. In my fieldwork, there have been fascinating revelations by Maoist sympathizers and cadres about how messages were exchanged during the daily activity of a temple visit, by women in Kashmir about how they carried out jihad from the home front by nursing, cooking and cleaning for militants, and by former women cadres of the LTTE about how they traded their life of domestic drudgery and harsh living conditions at home for the exciting life of a guerrilla fighter who could drive lorries and devise secret intelligence codes. Activist and author Arundhati Roy documents the daily lives of the Maoist guerrillas in her outstanding war narrative *The broken republic* (2011). She tells us the Bhumkal



celebrations in Dandakaranya (in central India) involve dancing and singing by Maoist cadres and PGLA<sup>10</sup> militia with AK-47s on their shoulders; Maoist men and women read Pablo Neruda's poems and their cultural wing, the Chetna Natya Manch, performs songs and plays amidst pictures of Chairman Mao and Marx. Warring people singing and dancing into the night, as Roy details, is not only a story of war's everyday but also perhaps tells us how the nature of war has significantly changed. It is no longer an exceptional activity marked by temporal and spatial allusions but a state of being, sometimes for many years and over several generations.



The war zone, therefore, is a world of its own which constructs its politics, economy, culture and society, sustains people and is an institution in itself. Warring people carry out their daily chores and then pose the question to us as researchers, scholars and war experts, 'aap bahar wale humare bare mein kya sochte hain, kya likhte hain?' (You outsiders, what do you think about us? What do you write about us?)<sup>11</sup> Do we then point them out as 'actors' in the international system engaged in an armed conflict whose causes lie in state failures or belligerence and whose consequences are all about 'post-conflict reconstruction and development'? These people are more than what we know about them—they are singers, dancers, guerrillas, poets, cooks and they juggle all these identities in a war effortlessly, sometimes even masquerading as different everyday characters. A Maoist woman cadre similarly asked Arundhati Roy during her visit to Dandakaranya, 'What do they think of us outside? What do students say? Tell me about the women's movement, what are the big issues now?' (Roy 2011) The urgency of studying different wars differently requires us to reconsider and rethink this status of the 'outsider'. 'Outsider' status has advantages in terms of research distances that are necessary, but researchers are also engaged in the intellectual exercise of 'othering' war. The beginnings of war are in the banal, in the everyday acquisition of tribal lands and forests, in daily encroachments on the property of the poor, in the brutality of the police and security forces, in a sudden suicide bomb attack that visits people's lives as they go about their mundane daily chores. War bodies have stories that are rooted in the everyday, and IR struggles to create an intellectual framework for studying them.

### War bodies and their IR

War constitutes communities and nations through a cultural and political narrative of 'war bodies' and the affect they generate. Caroline Holmqvist (in this issue), drawing from Judith Butler, has referred to the state of becoming of the 'human' as an important site of ontological enquiry for war studies. What is a valued/grievable life and who is 'living' is a political decision seeped in power relations, Holmqvist reminds. By extending this argument to war's injured and dead, I want to emphasize the ever growing relevance of war bodies, as flesh and blood 'human' forms that have, in recent times, taken a whole new meaning with

<sup>10</sup> The People's Guerrilla Liberation Army (PGLA) is the armed wing of the Communist Party of India (CPI)–Maoist engaged in a bitter armed conflict with government forces in India.

<sup>11</sup> Many people have asked me these questions during my fieldwork in India.

the in-your-face displays of dead, decapitated, abused, brutalized bodies. The international media and IR scholarly world are trying to make sense of the Syrian war at the moment, the body count and the news of how a Syrian rebel actually tore out the heart of a soldier and ate it as 'revenge for the atrocities of the government'.<sup>12</sup> It is worth noting that these brutalized, injured and lifeless 'bodies' have a powerful role in public and policy discourses, and policing/politicizing body images are critical in war's propaganda. If al Qaeda leader Abu Musab Zarqawi dented al Qaeda's prospects in Iraq by publicly displaying the beheadings of civilians, Americans lost the propaganda war with the Guantanamo/Abu Ghraib prisoner abuse images. The Obama administration had learnt from past mistakes and ensured that pictures of the stealthily conducted raid in Pakistan's Abbotabad town in which the al Qaeda chief, Osama bin Laden was killed, were not released. The administration argued that pictures of the dead, lifeless body of the Islamist militant leader who was inspiration for many jihadi attacks worldwide, if displayed or leaked to the media, would provoke frenzied emotional reactions and reprisal attacks against Americans.<sup>13</sup> The politics around war bodies is more profoundly evident in our times than ever before.

People have few apprehensions about seeing/touching/feeling war bodies in contemporary wars, far removed from wars of the past where sanitized coffins draped in flags and body bags were all one could see. 'War body' tourism in Libya drove thousands of men and women accompanied by children to behold the sight of dictator Muammar Gaddafi's dead body on display in a meat store in Misrata and later also in Tripoli. Those interviewed by the media confirmed that they brought their little children to see the lifeless form of a man who knew no mercy; others said it was cathartic to see a powerful man like Gaddafi in this lifeless form; many others who had lived in his brutal regime wanted closure (see Chulov 2011). Bodies convey meaning, identity and symbolism in war. War bodies are not all lifeless and mutilated; some are warriors, injured, crippled, raped, held hostage, spying and spied upon, grieving and even celebrating. Feminists have been the first to point out how war is fought on particular gendered bodies of women (Davis 1997; Parashar 2009; D'Costa 2011). Sylvester reminds us, in her final comments in this issue, that no one is better equipped than feminists to study the 'experiences' of war; after all, 'war is ours because war knows gender intimately'. The different bodies of/in war are increasingly being used by warring sides to generate affect and constitute communities. In an age of revolutionized and advanced warfare technology (aimed at minimizing civilian casualties), we witness more injured bodies and the increasing use of the human form as a war tool.

In India, when communal riots killed a number of people in 1992 after the Babri mosque demolition episode, mainstream media talked of restraint and no brutalized bodies were shown, so as to prevent more reaction, anger and violence. The Indian public, state and media have also been very circumspect about showing bodies in Kashmir, of soldiers, militants and civilians. Even during the

---

<sup>12</sup> See <<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2013-05-15/gruesome-syria-mutilation-video-sparks-condemnation/4690154>>, accessed 15 May 2013.

<sup>13</sup> See <<http://edition.cnn.com/2013/01/10/world/bin-laden-photos>>, accessed 14 May 2013.

1999 war with Pakistan in Kargil, soldiers' bodies were protected from media and public scrutiny, including the bodies of those prisoners of wars who had been mutilated beyond recognition.<sup>14</sup> This seems to be changing, the Maoist insurgent wars<sup>15</sup> (involving the security forces and sections of citizenry) revealing a different politics of and around war bodies. The Maoists indulge in brutal killings of security forces and have even resorted to tactics such as beheadings.<sup>16</sup> The state has condemned these tactics by the Maoists, but the security forces have ensured, through displays of Maoist bodies as prized trophies, that the discourse of 'othering' is kept alive and the enemy identity is produced and sustained through the politics of the dead. Mainstream public discourses became habituated to mourning for Indian 'citizens' injured and killed in jihadi 'terrorist attacks' in Kashmir and elsewhere by militants from across the border (Pakistan). These discourses now endorse the idea of the Maoist guerrilla as the 'citizen enemy' or the 'enemy combatant'. Dead bodies of Maoist cadres and sympathizers, tied to bamboo poles like hunted animals being taken for a barbeque, have also surfaced in the media.<sup>17</sup> The message is clear that those who oppose the state will be brutalized in life and further in death. The bodies of the dead on display are meant to speak to the living. What we need to understand, thus, is not only how the politics of mourning is played out and who is mourned for, but when that mourning must occur. War bodies play an important role in framing the discourse of mourning (Butler 2004).

There are other questions about how war bodies are brutalized in the construction of enemy identity—to convey political messages of who belongs and who is the 'other', how communities are constructed and how affect can be generated. When the LTTE chief Prabhakaran was killed on 19 May 2009 during the war in Sri Lanka, his body was put on public broadcast by state television.<sup>18</sup> International media clamoured to show the 'first' images of the dreaded 'terrorist'

In previous wars, bodies/corpses often protected from media/public scrutiny, this seems to be changing

<sup>14</sup> See <<http://www.ndtv.com/article/india/kargil-martyr-saurabh-kalia-s-torture-violations-by-pakistan-unacceptable-says-government-298032>>, accessed 12 May 2013.

<sup>15</sup> Indian Maoists are a well-organized and well-trained insurgent group of socially and economically marginalized populations (untouchable castes, Dalits and indigenous tribals, Adivasis) that operates under the umbrella of the CPI-Maoist. The CPI-Maoist emerged as a uniting force only in 2004 with the merger of two major guerrilla factions, the People's War Group (PWG) and the Maoist Communist Centre (MCC). They have an armed unit, the PGLA, and cultural, political and administrative units operating in several parts of India. Their armed resistance is based on the Leninist and Maoist notion of a protracted people's war against the bourgeois state and its oppressive practices. The Maoists perceive the state as a neo-liberal/upper-caste oppressor that forces its own citizens to the margins and destroys them in its quest for natural resources and political power. The Indian state perceives the Maoists as 'deviant' citizens who must either be militarily eliminated or rehabilitated into the social and political mainstream. This is neither an ethnic nor a religious war but a political contest for power and resources between the state and its citizens.

<sup>16</sup> See '2 Maoists involved in Indwar killing held', *Times of India*, 15 October 2009, <[http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2009-10-15/ranchi/28083896\\_1\\_zonal-commander-kundan-pahan-francis-indwar](http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2009-10-15/ranchi/28083896_1_zonal-commander-kundan-pahan-francis-indwar)>, accessed 21 August 2012.

<sup>17</sup> See 'Outrage over dead Maoists' pictures', 18 June 2010. <[http://www.gulf-times.com/site/topics/article.asp?cu\\_no=2&item\\_no=368931&version=1&template\\_id=40&parent\\_id=22](http://www.gulf-times.com/site/topics/article.asp?cu_no=2&item_no=368931&version=1&template_id=40&parent_id=22)>, accessed 20 August 2012.

<sup>18</sup> See <[http://www.rfi.fr/actuen/articles/113/article\\_3802.asp](http://www.rfi.fr/actuen/articles/113/article_3802.asp)>, accessed 14 May 2013.

who had taken on the might of the state for more than two decades. His body was further desecrated by the Sri Lankan army and the pictures were deliberately leaked to the international media. Much before we, in the international, debated about Osama bin Laden's body and its inappropriate Islamic burial, there was vigorous debate in Sri Lanka about the body of Prabhakaran, how it would be cremated and how a man who had been instrumental in commemorating Tamil war bodies, setting up war memorials and public ceremonies to honour the dead, would be memorialized (or not). The Rajapakse regime announced that he would not be given a proper cremation; he was a 'terrorist' and would be treated like one. His body was dumped in a mass grave. The 'terrorist' body became the repository of the majoritarian chauvinism that has come to define Sri Lankan post-war politics.<sup>19</sup>

Early in 2013, the picture of Prabhakaran's 13-year-old son, Balachandran, also abused and killed during the war, led to a lot of global outrage. The teenage boy was shown eating a snack in a bunker in one of the pictures and in another his bullet-pierced chest confirmed that he had been shot from close range.<sup>20</sup> In India, politicians and media chose that picture as part of their overall pressure tactics on the Indian government for a vote in favour of the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Council Resolution, passed in March 2012, that urged Sri Lanka to 'credibly investigate' allegations of violations during the war against the Tamil Tiger separatists in 2009.<sup>21</sup> War bodies and the war dead therefore construct the international in various ways and are powerful sources of symbols and meanings. It is not surprising, then, that the first activity undertaken by the Sri Lankan state when they overran LTTE-controlled territory in eastern and northern Sri Lanka was to bulldoze all the war memorials and LTTE graveyards.<sup>22</sup> The martyrdom narrative of the dead Tamil bodies had to be altered in the new Sri Lanka. Bodies are powerful war narratives themselves but IR has been looking for them elsewhere.<sup>23</sup>

### International relations' war stories

Within the discipline of international relations, war studies continues to dominate and the scholarly attractiveness of war does not seem to have waned. But the analysis has not always been insightful. A Maoist guerrilla fighter in India told activist and writer Arundhati Roy about journalists who visited Maoist areas and wrote about them: 'I was thinking about those (journalists) who came last year for the Bhumkal celebrations. They came for a day or two. One posed with my AK,

---

<sup>19</sup> Prabhakaran's mother's cremation site was also desecrated in 2011. See <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-12567667>>, accessed 13 May 2013.

<sup>20</sup> See <<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/handed-a-snack-and-then-executed-the-last-hours-of-the-12yearold-son-of-a-tamil-tiger-8500295.html>>, accessed 15 March 2013.

<sup>21</sup> See 'UN adopts resolution on Sri Lanka war crimes probe', <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-17471300>>, accessed 22 March 2012.

<sup>22</sup> Field notes, August 2008. Also see <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/may/04/sri-lanka-must-respect-war-memory>>, accessed 13 May 2013.

<sup>23</sup> By 'elsewhere' I mean that IR has been looking for war narratives in state behaviour, policies or abstract stories, not in the physical and emotional experiences of common people.



had himself photographed and then went back and called us Killing Machines or something' (Roy 2011). This is not so different from IR's relationship with wars, in which abstract theories are routinely applied by 'experts' who have little understanding of the ground situation while the more nuanced, micro-narratives of war are left out. I studied in detail the International Studies Association convention programme of 2012 to gain insights about what this disciplinary approach to wars looks like after at least seven decades of IR existing as an academic discipline.

In most of these papers, Cold War, civil wars, ethnic wars, world wars, 'war on terror', energy wars are common understandings of war, followed by war in specific countries (Afghanistan, Vietnam, Iraq, etc). Some discussions are woven around the challenges and opportunities of the post-war moment. The human element of war and people's actual experiences find their way into panels about women combatants and war-related mourning and trauma but most of the discussion hardly looks beyond what IR already believes it knows about wars.

Therefore, one can easily relate to the concerns expressed by critical war and security scholars such as Tarak Barkawi (2011) and Christine Sylvester (2011; 2013). Barkawi makes the point that war is being studied in relation to other institutions, and that normative frameworks like state, democracy, ethics, legality and the causes and consequences of war are being evaluated. War is not being studied on its own, per se. Moreover, the ontological framework of war is taken for granted (Barkawi 2011, 6). International relations assumes that war is armed engagement involving states or perhaps non-state actors. Many recent publications still talk about the politics around/within states and state behaviour as critical to war studies. David Sobek's 2008 book, *The causes of war*, does not attempt to engage with the ontological understanding of wars (taken as a given) and in the introduction itself asks, 'why do states choose war over diplomacy, given that the vast majority of time they rely on diplomacy to resolve their differences?' (2008, 1). It is clearly assumed that states are the primary actors engaged in the activity called war (for rational or irrational gains). Levy and Thompson are also concerned with states and their relationship to wars and define war 'broadly as sustained, coordinated violence between political organizations' (2010, 5).

Missing from these kinds of macro-analyses are a variety of people and their complex emotional and bodily experiences. The aim of theory is to offer a normative framework that can help make sense of global events. Within the disciplinary boundaries of IR, war institutions and actors (states, IOs, militaries) endorse each other. War keeps alive the idea of 'high politics' and in turn is (re)produced by it. War theories have failed to capture the day-to-day living and negotiations in war which can be more insightful about why wars happen and why they continue to be an option for many communities and nations. Bina D'Costa, in her study on gendered war crimes in South Asia with a focus on the Bangladesh liberation war of 1971, makes the distinction between macro- and micro-narratives of war: the former refers to official narratives of the state and in this instance the dominant narratives of militant groups. By 'micro-narratives' she refers to the lived experiences of people who had to 're-landscape their lives due to political events' like the 1971 liberation war (D'Costa 2011, 13). It is these micro-narratives that feminists have done well to capture in their research and writings.

Carolyn Nordstrom states that 'theory purporting to describe war that does not address the realities of war—theories that delete any of war's casualties or

perpetrators, heroes or villains—is not theory, it is ideology. One might argue that war is supposed to be about militaries, and that justifies deleting non-combatants, women, children, the infirm, rogues, and “collateral damage” from astute analysis. But writing about what is supposed to be is neither data nor science’ (2005, 408). As a student of IR I would not argue that theories are dispensable and that narratives alone will suffice. These theories must probe questions about the nature of war rather than accept it as an ontological reality. Moreover, the limitations of theories in offering wide-ranging explanations of different kinds of wars are accepted even by realists (see for example Sobek 2008, 2). It is, thus, all the more important to probe the nature of ‘knowledge’ already available about wars and to look for non-conventional sources of knowledge to support deeper and richer analyses. The problem with existing knowledge is that very rarely does war get attention as an activity that involves real people, people who have an intimate knowledge of the wars and also the ‘international relations’ of war. Christine Sylvester persuasively reminds us that ‘war cannot be fully apprehended unless it is studied upwards from people’s physical, emotional, and social experiences, not only downwards from ‘high politics’ places that sweep blood, tears and laughter away, or assign those things to some other field’ (2013, 2). A Kashmiri cab driver nonchalantly mentioned to me during my fieldwork in 2008, ‘This conflict is good for us. Money comes from all sides. I am a poor driver and yet I can afford a roof over my head because of the conflict.’<sup>24</sup> A powerful and yet understated fact about who is inside the war and what wars can mean to common people.

Post-colonial scholars continue to debate the ontological foundations of the nation state vigorously. At a conference on India–Australia relations, held in September 2012 at the Institute of Post-Colonial Studies in Melbourne,<sup>25</sup> Sankaran Krishna observed that the nation is an emotional landscape and the question is always about who is thinking/imagining it. Instead of the usual question about what is a nation, the questions should be about who is a nation, how and when is a nation. This same scrutiny must be extended to war by critical IR scholars. War questions ought to include: who is inside the war and who is outside; how war changes the everyday landscape of a society and polity; what kinds of emotions are part of war; and also who is writing about war and how. As I have inferred throughout this article, IR scholars would benefit from interdisciplinary borrowing—from anthropology, post-colonialism, novels, poetry, history, cultural theory—to address some of their own war questions.

Patricia Mukhim, an indigenous human rights activist from Meghalaya in the northeast of India, poignantly asked at the post-colonial IR gathering in Melbourne<sup>26</sup> if indigenous peoples were outside or inside IR because IR seemed to her and her cohorts only about diplomats and academics somewhere at a distance who theorized on their lives and their conflicts. If this is the dominant perception among people whose lives are deeply enmeshed in wars against displacement, against tyranny of the state and against their exclusion from the national narrative

<sup>24</sup> Translated from Hindi and part of a conversation in July 2008.

<sup>25</sup> This was a three-day conference (6–8 September 2012) attended by post-colonial scholars working on India and Australia. Well-known Indian post-colonial thinker Ashish Nandy was present and his works were engaged with by the presenters in a variety of ways.

<sup>26</sup> See footnote 18.



War  
should be  
scrutinise  
d similarly

of nation states, one can safely conclude that the study of war needs to democratize, with some urgency, its ontological leanings and centre people in its analysis. Even if the emancipatory agenda (knowledge for purposes of change and betterment) is not inherent in war studies, and knowledge is produced for the sake of it, studying/theorizing war from the bottom up will be more insightful to analysis of the cause and effect of wars.

Ashish Nandy, in his study of the violence during India's partition in 1947, proved that ordinary people are repositories of knowledge about wars and their memories are crucial log-books in constructing a war narrative.<sup>27</sup> In my earlier works on women's support to the militant violence in Kashmir and Sri Lanka, I found extraordinary sophistication in how women conceptualized their lives and their involvement in wars. Whereas the theoretical impulse has been to see women as victims and mourners in patriarchal wars, these women had stories that were about their own personal involvement in wars; stories that could all be woven into narratives about how traditional gender roles did not keep women away from war and violence. Women in their roles as wives, mothers and sisters came out in support of the militants in Kashmir and provided legitimacy and a mass base to the anti-India armed resistance (Parashar 2011a; 2011b; 2011c).

Similarly, women in Sri Lanka were able to coherently narrate their stories about serving in the LTTE, a patriarchal militant group. In a bizarre story of gender subversion in wartime, many of these girls were sent by their families to fight in the war, while boys and men were shielded. These women lived happy days in the LTTE, given the opportunities it offered to Tamil girls, coming from a patriarchal society, to hold the gun and drive lorries and military vehicles. They served as loyal foot soldiers, sometimes even bodyguards, to LTTE chief Prabhakaran, and his male supporters like Colonel Karuna, only to be told that they had no political roles once they left the LTTE. They were left destitute, waiting to get help from the state and NGOs to alleviate them from poverty and social stigma (Parashar 2011a; 2011b; 2011c). In my ongoing research on the Maoist wars in India, it is not unusual to find men and women joining the Maoist ranks because it brings a steady income to poor households (Parashar 2012). War in the Maoist insurgency in India is an economic enterprise, a job to go to that fetches wages to sustain the family (2012). No top-down IR theory of war could talk about these human experiences and capture the range of war activities and the people involved.

International relations was established seventy years ago to study war and peace and its major scholarly activity on war is continuing to decipher war's causes. That reveals how little IR knows about contemporary wars and the actors on the ground. War studies in IR, in order to gain analytical relevance, could take its cue from security studies. Security studies, which till the end of the Cold War, considered state security and external threats alone, has now focused its attention on society and the individual as the referent of security (Buzan and Hansen 2009). Moreover, the emancipatory potential of security studies was highlighted in the Welsh School of thinking (Booth 2007). War studies is still focused on the state as its referent, even in an intra-state/civil war, and on abstractions of causes and impact. Putting people, societies and communities and bodily experiences at the

<sup>27</sup> He mentioned this at his talk at the India–Australia Post-Colonial Conference in Melbourne, 6–8 September 2012.

heart of its theoretical framework would expand its relevance and analytical capabilities.

In the last five years, feminist war and security studies have done that in a variety of ways and have not only highlighted the impact of war on women's bodies and gender relations but also busted the myth of non-existent female warring bodies (for example: Sjöberg and Gentry 2007; MacKenzie 2009; 2012; Parashar 2009; 2011a; Sylvester 2005; 2011; 2013; Sylvester and Parashar 2008; Alison 2008). They have also focused on the emotions of war research and war's silent stories (Sylvester 2011; 2013; D'Costa 2011). At the San Diego International Studies Association (ISA) Convention 2012, the roundtable on war organized by Christine Sylvester (on the urgency of studying war differently) and the panel organized by Finnish IR scholar Elina Penttinen (on the epistemology and ontology of studying war: possibilities and challenges) generated a great deal of interest even among those coming from traditional war scholarship. Feminist IR, thus, is steadily expanding into new and challenging research areas on war and political violence but there is great deal more left to be done.

### **The road ahead**

Sylvester's interdisciplinary framework of privileging 'experience and emotions' provides a valuable cue to 'draw from a wide range of literatures, fictional and factual, from social science and the arts and humanities, looking for insights, links, and for unexpected locations and types of war experience' (2013, 125). Sylvester's war question at the April 2012 ISA San Diego panel on war was 'What does IR know about war?' As a scholar of IR who has spent more than three decades in this field theorizing about these issues, Sylvester is able to provide us with much needed insight about IR and war (2011; 2013). My first question within war studies is one rephrased from Sylvester: What does war know about IR? Other related questions are: How can war inform IR? What does it mean to study war from below? How do the researcher's close interactions with the research world (war) contribute to the study of power, institutions and relationships? What are the possibilities and challenges of social research that captures lived experience and how does it converse with, and contest, abstract disciplinary theories and categories? These are the questions I have grappled with and continue to explore in my research on the ongoing wars in South Asia.

I spent my angst-filled teenage years in the turbulent 1990s when India not only struggled with communal violence and insurgent wars in Kashmir and the northeast and caste wars in the rural hinterland, but also fought a conventional war with Pakistan at Kargil in 1999 when the threat of a nuclear escalation was imminent. I was part of these wars, as a consumer of media news, as part of the patriotic public, as a student of history and politics, as a dissident in my own upper-caste family, as having distant family members and friends directly fighting or involved in some of these wars. I have therefore, always been interested in war and political violence and how people manage to live, survive, mourn, laugh and find meaning through them. The road ahead is certainly an interdisciplinary approach to reframing war questions that will further the agenda of what Barkawi calls 'critical war studies'. We need to refocus IR's war project and borrow from anthropologists, historians, cultural theorists, novelists, psychologists, poets,

writers, activists, to truly understand what people involved in wars are saying and doing. With all the conceptual/theoretical advancements in IR and all our claims that we have diversified the 'international', that the 'personal' is international, if an IR department can still ask a candidate in a job interview, 'How is studying the Maoist war in India international relations?'<sup>28</sup> we need to seriously reflect on our discipline and its ontological commitments.

War will continue to attract students and scholars, artists and writers, journalists and activists. Alpana Kishore, in her article 'Everybody loves a good war' (2012), captures the war journalist's point of view when she writes, 'Kashmir added clout and pizzazz to your resumé. It had mojo. It had dangerous foreign liaisons. You dealt with armed militants, grenades strung across their chests, contemptuous and cerebral generals, Pashtun accents that swore "*Kashmir banega Pakistan!*", blown-up BSF [Border Security Force] commanders in their IED [Improvised Explosive Device]-hit vehicles strung on trees, kidnapped hostages, state brutalities in bedrooms and kitchens and hysterical protestors screaming hatred.' War captures the imagination of the people and, whether debated as just or unjust, is intimately engaged with human endeavour in every period of civilization. We need to push our curiosity and critical thinking to ask different questions as I have argued in this article. Others in this special issue have made similar appeals for a genealogy of critical war studies and philosophical enquiry about war-fighting and its relationship to people and everyday life.

Philosophical texts, for Brighton, hold the key to specific historical experiences of war and he proposes a political theory of fighting based on his readings of ancient Greek texts. Brighton compels me to (re)imagine the Indian epic *Mahabharata* (Great War) mapped on the social and political landscape of South Asia. The conversations on and off the battlefield in *Kurukshetra* throw light on the gendered order preceding the war and that which would follow; pose challenges in thinking about 'just war' and the ethical conduct of it; and draw linkages, for the purposes of my research, on the everyday negotiations of gender, violence and nation. There is another metaphorical significance. In most Indian families the *Mahabharata* is not kept at home, as it is the story of a terrible fratricide; blood against blood, kin against kin. Superstition has it that in homes where the epic is found in book form infighting and bloodshed are imminent. I had the book at home, against the knowledge of my family, and was fascinated by the many smaller stories within the grand narrative. International relations needs to unravel its many *Mahabharata* stories (of wars within the war) too, especially because, unlike the Indian epic, IR stories will find easy takers and willing homes, academic and otherwise.

### Notes on contributor

**Swati Parashar** is a lecturer in politics and international relations at Monash University in Melbourne. She has previously worked with policy thinktanks in Singapore and New Delhi. Her research publications and teaching focus on critical war and security studies, feminist international relations and women, gender and political violence in South Asia. Email: [swatiparashar@gmail.com](mailto:swatiparashar@gmail.com)

<sup>28</sup> I was asked this at a job interview in December 2011 when I made a presentation on India's Maoists wars.

## References

- Alison, Miranda (2008) *Women and political violence: female combatants in ethno-national conflict* (London: Routledge)
- Ambalavanar, Arun (2011) 'The farce of a fake tigress', <[www.srilankaguardian.org/2011/08/farce-of-fake-tigress.html](http://www.srilankaguardian.org/2011/08/farce-of-fake-tigress.html)>, accessed 10 September 2012
- Barkawi, Tarak (2011) 'From war to security: security studies, the wider agenda and the fate of the study of war', *Millennium*, 39:3, 701–716
- Booth, Ken (2007) *Theory of world security* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press)
- Butler, Judith (2004) *Precarious life: the powers of mourning and violence* (London: Verso)
- Buzan, Barry and Lene Hansen (2009) *The evolution of international security studies* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press)
- Chhachhi, Sheba (2002) 'Finding face: images of women from the Kashmir Valley' in Urvasi Butalia (ed) *Speaking peace: women's voices from Kashmir* (New Delhi: Kali for Women), 189–225
- Chulov, Martin (2011) 'Gaddafi's corpse continues to attract impatient Misrata hordes', *The Guardian*, 23 October, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/oct/23/gaddafi-corpse-attracts-misrata-hordes/print>>, accessed 23 October 2011
- Das, Veena (2007) *Violence and the descent into the ordinary* (Berkeley: University of California Press)
- Das, Veena, Arthur Kleinman, Mamphela Ramphele and Pamela Reynolds (eds) (2000) *Violence and subjectivity* (Berkeley: University of California Press)
- Das, Veena, Arthur Kleinman, Margaret Locke, Mamphela Ramphele and Pamela Reynolds (eds) (2001) *Remaking a world—violence, social suffering and recovery* (Berkeley: University of California Press)
- Davis, Nira Yuval (1997) *Gender and nation* (London: Sage)
- D'Costa, Bina (2011) *Nationbuilding, gender and war crimes in South Asia* (New York: Routledge)
- De Soyza, Niromi (2011) *Tamil tigress* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin)
- Gordon, Michael (2012) 'Wife, mother ... security threat', <<http://www.theage.com.au/opinion/political-news/wife-mother-security-threat-20120517-1yths.html>>, accessed 14 September 2012
- Kishore, Alpana (2012) 'Everybody loves a good war', <<http://www.newslandry.com/2012/09/everybody-loves-a-good-war/>>, accessed 13 September 2012
- Levy, Jack and William R Thompson (2010) *Causes of war* (Chichester, United Kingdom: Wiley–Blackwell)
- MacKenzie, Megan (2009) 'Securitization and desecuritization: female soldiers and the reconstruction of women in post-conflict Sierra Leone', *Security Studies*, 18:2, 241–261
- MacKenzie, Megan (2012) *Female soldiers in Sierra Leone: sex, security and post-conflict development* (New York: NYU)
- Nordstrom, Carolyn (1997) *A different kind of war story* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press)
- Nordstrom, Carolyn (2002) 'Four ways to tell a story on violence', *Reviews in Anthropology*, 31:1, 1–19
- Nordstrom, Carolyn (2005) '(Gendered) war', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 28:5, 399–412
- Parashar, Swati (2009) 'Feminist IR and women militants: case studies from South Asia', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 22:2, 235–256
- Parashar, Swati (2011a) 'Gender, jihad, and jingoism: women as perpetrators, planners, and patrons of militancy in Kashmir', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 34:4, 295–317
- Parashar, Swati (2011b) 'Embodied "otherness" and negotiations of difference: a critical self reflection on the politics of emotions in researching militant women', *International Studies Review*, 13:4, 687–708
- Parashar, Swati (2011c) 'Women militants as gendered political subjects' in Annika Kronsell and Erika Svedberg (eds) *Making gender, making war* (London: Routledge), 299–325
- Parashar, Swati (2012) 'Armed resistance, economic (in)security and the household: a case study of the Maoist insurgency in India', Paper presented at Workshop on Gendered Political Economy, Griffith University, Queensland, 24–25 September 2012

- Roberts, Michael (2011) 'A captivating fiction with a political slant?', <[www.srilankaguardian.org/2011/08/captivating-fiction-with-political.html](http://www.srilankaguardian.org/2011/08/captivating-fiction-with-political.html)>, accessed 10 September 2012
- Roy, Arundhati (2011) *Broken republic: three essays* (New Delhi: Hamish Hamilton)
- Sjoberg, Laura and Caron Gentry (2007) *Mothers, monsters, whores: women's violence in global politics* (London: Zed)
- Sobek, David (2008) *The causes of war* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Polity Press)
- Sylvester, Christine (2005) 'The art of war/the war question in (feminist) IR', *Millennium*, 33:3, 855–878
- Sylvester, Christine (ed) (2011) *Experiencing war* (London: Routledge)
- Sylvester, Christine (2013) *War as experience: contributions from international relations and feminist analysis* (London: Routledge)
- Sylvester, Christine and Swati Parashar (2009) 'The contemporary "Mahabharata" and the many "Draupadis": bringing gender to critical terrorism studies' in Richard Jackson, Marie Breen Smyth and Jeroen Gunning (eds) *Critical terrorism studies: a new research agenda* (London: Routledge), 178–193
- Wibben, Annick (2011) *Feminist security studies: a narrative approach* (London: Routledge)

Copyright of Cambridge Review of International Affairs is the property of Routledge and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.