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The Lounge Chair Interview: 10 Questions with Swati Sengupta

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By Aminah Sheikh



Let's get down to brass tacks. Why do you write?

I write because I have stories to tell. Because I want to tell these stories in a particular way. Some characters, and a vague, blurry indication of their predicament just pop up inside my head and I have no idea how they got there. Together, my characters and I, we embark on this journey to find out. This entire process – unpleasant at times but mostly exciting – provides me with the rush of air that keeps me going.

Sometimes though, I meet my characters in the real world. I may have heard about them from someone, so I go and meet them and find out their stories. I am talking about my non-fiction and reportage work here.

Basically, I am quiet, introverted and a loner. There's silence all around me. Writing helps me to survive because I can't talk much. I like to dwell in my own world in the company of my books, very few people I can relate to, and, the only way I am able to give vent to what's buzzing inside my head is through the written words – whether it is published or what remains in the closet.

Tell us about your most recent book or writing project. What were you trying to say or achieve with it?

My recent book, *Out of War* (non-fiction), published by Speaking Tiger Books, is about the narratives of surrendered CPI (Maoist) cadres. I spent two years travelling through different parts of India – Chhattisgarh, Odisha, Bihar, Jharkhand and West Bengal. I located them, talked to them for hours, and I've remained in touch with many for four years now. I tried to understand their lives and stories. In my book, I look at the Maoist movement, its successes and failures, the passions and sacrifices, through the struggles of individuals – their individual needs, personal longings, sufferings and self-respect.

How do these foot-soldiers themselves view the Maoist movement? Is the movement free from hierarchies and compromise? Are the soldiers free to visit their parents, partners, children? What about those that trust the police with the promise of a safe life and opt out? I visited their homes, heard their stories – stories of abuse, poverty, suffering, hurt, deceit, joy, love...

I worked hard to get these stories. The research was also emotionally taxing for me. It wrung out all my energy. These people and their stories deeply influenced me. Now I know why people turn to the Maoists for support, I know why they become Maoist cadres.

Professionally, I've achieved only that much – I've written the book, pouring my heart into it.

But personally, I've achieved much more. Without expecting to. It was incidental. There was a time when I worked full-time with a reputed newspaper, earned a fairly decent salary and felt happy about certain material comforts. I quit my job to write this book, but the cravings for material things had remained. Bit by bit, in the last four years that I worked on this book, the attachment to material things has gone, and I hope for good.

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