

Gunning for trouble

Investigating The Bofors scandal

Its impact - and inconclusive outcome

The scandal tarnished the image of two popular Prime Ministers (one posthumously), threw light on the unscrupulous world of the global arms trade and its nexus with politics, and forced banking haven Switzerland to change its impenetrable laws to help foreign governments unearth cases of large-scale corruption.

And all for a weapon system which had a fair chance of winning the contest on its own, as we learn, and did go on to display its worth soon.

The Bofors artillery gun scandal, featuring politicians of all shades and agendas, over-enthusiastic arms manufacturers, shadowy but influential arms dealers, obdurate and obfuscating bureaucrats, conscientious prosecutors, dedicated and manipulative media persons, a Bollywood megastar, et al - could have well flowed from the pen of, say, Fredrick Forsyth or David Baldacci or rather, John Le Carre to spin one of their captivating tales.

However, it is journalist Chitra Subramaniam, known for her decade-long extensive coverage from Switzerland of the twists and turns of the scandal, who does the task.

In "Boforsgate: A Journalist's Pursuit of Truth" (Juggernaut, 328 pp, Rs 899), she offers a detailed account of the episode which brought down the Rajiv Gandhi government in ignominy, blighted the careers of several politicians in governments to come, and exposed the double standards of Swedish global peacemaker Olof Palme and

his nation, chiefly based on her own reportage and experiences.

All this despite, as she admits, needing to know "What on earth was a howitzer" and having to consult the UN Library - in those pre-internet days - to find out!

Sketching her life and her career to explain how it came about that she was living and working in Switzerland when the scandal broke out in April 1987, Subramaniam recounts how the whole sordid episode came to light in a rather farcical manner. A Swedish bank sought clarification from a senior Bofors executive about some surreptitious large payments by the company into Swiss bank accounts. The Swedish banker had no problem with the transfers but questioned their classification - and the secrecy surrounding them, and the executive had to brandish a copy of the contract, spelling the provisions, to make his point.

It was perhaps this that formed the basis for the Swedish Radio report in April 1987 claiming bribery in the Bofors arms deal with India, which created a furore in New Delhi, and led to the demand for news from Subramaniam - then a stringer for the Hindu.

Despite being less than a decade in the profession, being married just for four years, and her first baby on the way in a few months, Subramaniam went on to carefully construct a network of informants spanning Switzerland to Sweden, obtained classified documents, and in an advanced state of pregnancy, spend hours at government offices in Geneva pouring through massive registers to identify the firms whose names came up in the money trail.

Her coming baby's cot became a repository for the papers and documents she amassed, and she spread them out on the floor as she tried to identify the money trail.

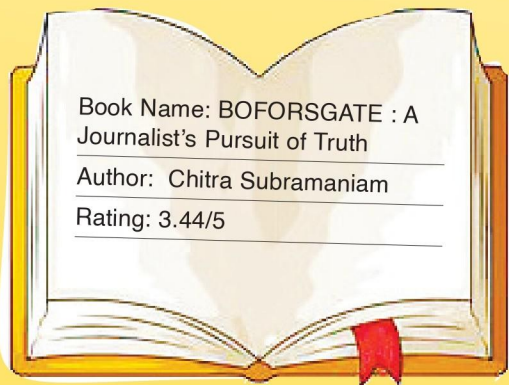
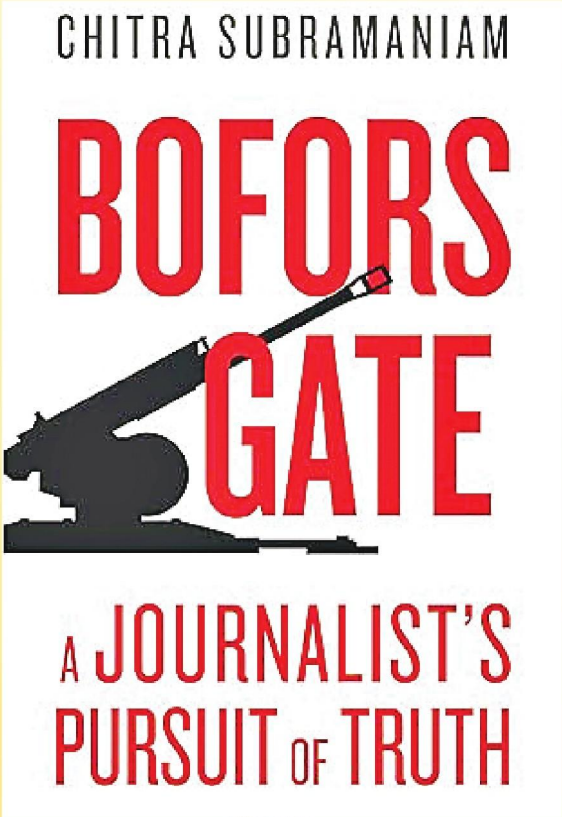
Yet, as she goes on to depict, it was not an easy ride for her - her family's fury at her dedication to the story despite her new-born, spells of friction and silent tension with her husband, and a boss who seemed to have his own agenda and no respect for her confidences and promises to sources.

And then, there was the outside pressure - bribes, in the form of at least one suitcase plonked on her table or promises of a better, higher-paying job, incrimination, with her bank account hacked and money deposited into it, graduating to intimidation - threats of harming her son, vandalism, and attempted sabotage, and then, character assassination.

However, for all these threat actors, she identifies "Tom and Jerry" and "Uriah Heep" (from a rather unpleasant Charles Dickens character), with the last one labelled as the most vicious, there were benefactors. Like "Snowdrop" in Switzerland - who even assured her protection, her version of "Deep Throat" in Sweden, named "Sting", lavish in providing documents - but at his own pace.

There was more ambiguously, a suave Swedish arms dealer in Geneva she went on to name "Kaa" from Rudyard Kipling's Jungle Books, who provided an incisive and no-holds-barred look into the world of arms deals, and a served as sounding board for some of her discoveries - including the likely size of the bribe.

While most of all these figures remain under pseudonyms, "Sting" shed his anonymity 25 years afterwards and identified himself as Sten Lindstrom, a former chief of the Swedish police in a wide-ranging interview - provided in the book - where he shares his thoughts on the case - and its probe, especially by India, his motivation to



role of Rajiv Gandhi.

Also, adding to the value of the book, are her encounters with one of the Hinduja brothers, Arun Nehru, V.P. Singh, bureaucrat Bhure Lal, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, a young Arun Jaitley, etc, being a brief part of the Indian probe, as well as an eye-opening interview with flamboyant former Army chief Gen K. Sundarji, who ascended and held the post when the whole episode was going on.

A few small shortcomings are the list of dramatis personae at the beginning without any identification, and some small errors like naming the legendary, long-time Saudi Oil Minister Sheikh Yamani as of Egypt, and an Indian Prime Minister as S. Chandrashekhar instead of Chandra Shekhar.

On the whole, Subramaniam, in her book, does not intend to play a court in judging the role of Rajiv Gandhi, and the two Aruns - Arun Nehru and Arun Singh, among other questions, but marshals her account of what she did and found out - and what the eventual outcome was.

The truth was in the evidence handed over to India by Swiss officials in 1997 - but still under wraps. (IANS)

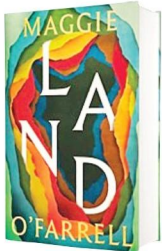
June's books include a speculative fiction debut, two multigenerational historical fictions

It is not too early to start picking out your summer reading list because a slew of new releases promise to keep June interesting. Standouts for the perfect summer beach read include a highly anticipated debut of a speculative fiction rising star and several historical-fiction options.

'Land' by Maggie O'Farrell

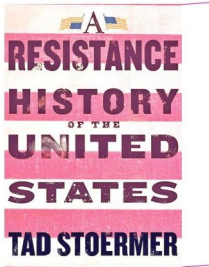
The bestselling author of "Hamnet" and "The Marriage Portrait" returns with a novel about Ireland in the 1860s, during the years before and after the Great Hunger. "Land" follows a man named Tomás and his son Liam as they work on the Ordnance Survey, a project to map the whole of Ireland for the British Crown.

Through its characters, the book "stages an argument about the virtues of various types of maps—those that are measured, those that are recollected, those that are dreamed," said The New Yorker. In her latest work, "the facts ground the fiction, the fiction enlivens the facts," and both "work together to suggest that the pursuit of resurrecting the past and the pursuit of telling a good story can, in some cases, be one and the same." (June 2, \$32, Penguin Random House, Amazon)



'A Resistance History of the United States' by Tad Stoermer

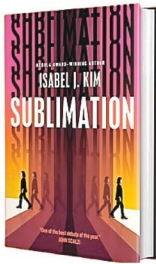
Historian Tad Stoermer reframes American history by revisiting past resistance movements, such as the Salem Witch Trials and the Underground Railroad. Through these examples, Stoermer "dismantles the mythologies that pass for American history – exposing the curated nostalgia, moral evasions and institutional silences that have long protected abusive power," said the publisher. (June 2, \$20, Penguin Random House, Amazon)



'Sublimation' by Isabel J. Kim

Isabel J. Kim has made a name for herself in the genre of speculative fiction. The winner of the Nebula, Locus and Shirley Jackson prizes for her short stories is publishing her debut novel about immigration and doppelgangers this summer.

Across "Sublimation," immigration is explored through a science-fiction lens in a world where emigrating creates a second "instance" of the person who stays behind in their home country. The story follows Soyoung Rose Kang, a Korean immigrant in America, who comes face to face with her clone when she returns to South Korea for a funeral. Kim's "pulls in historical, cultural and literary examples of 'instancing'" before "recasting them all in the brilliant light of her imagination," said The New York Times. (June 2, \$29, Macmillan, Amazon)



'Daughters of the Sun and Moon' by Lisa See

Best-selling author Lisa See returns with another historical fiction novel that illuminates a dark era of American history. The story focuses on the real-life "Night of Horrors" massacre of 18 Chinese immigrant men and boys in post-Civil War Los Angeles in 1871.

The novel is told through the shifting narration of three Chinese women whose friendship helps them survive the chaotic time. See offers a "stunning piece of historical fiction based in truth," said Library Journal. Her book will "touch readers with the characters' resilience, heroism and devoted friendship." (June 9, \$29, Simon & Schuster, Amazon)

