

# ‘Bombs, burgers and the banality of evil — why should animals face brutal wars waged by inhumane beings?’

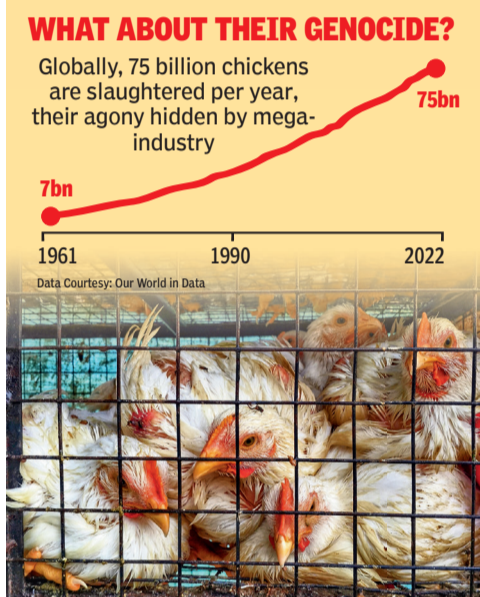
Billions of non-human beings are killed by explosions and implosions in wars whose violence we have grown to ‘tolerate’ — yet, their carnage does not originate there. It starts at your breakfast table, writes **Srijana Mitra Das** in *Times Evoke*:

How strange the last few weeks have been, dear reader, the world trembling on the cusp of a war whose motivation remains unclear and duration unknown. As we behold the state of Iran, pummeled by bombs and breathing in short gasps between carnage and carrying on, a few things grow clear though.

The first is our startling tolerance for violence. While we spend hours discussing the price of oil, down to the last greasy drop, many have forgotten the children murdered in schoolrooms, the patients slowly recovering in hospitals brutally terminated, the lives of shoppers, buying bread and vegetables, suddenly ended by a missile. Their existence — full of the minute struggles, hearts deep with love and yearning, layered minds full of learning, voices that hum beneath our breath, feet that move to the hands of a clock, humour like a warm glow, artful skills forming the tapestry of a joyful life — just gone.

They were taken by weapons unleashed by a West, restless for blood and profit. We have somehow learnt to live with these losses, accepting the cataclysmic ending of lives whose origins on Earth began six million years ago — over that vast time, human forms and powers evolved, developing to the point where we can sustain societies and innovate dreams to reality. Yet, we uneasily accept such life being crushed by powers that seek a few dollars more to add to their gazillions.

Why has violence become so banal, as Hannah Arendt wrote? Several industries make it so. The first is the



**DO YOU KNOW WHERE MY HOME WENT?** From Syria to Sudan, Ukraine to Iran, humans are busy unleashing weapons and wars which have destroyed the habitat and lives of the most innocent creatures on Earth



military-industrial complex (MIC), spread globally with its head in the United States. This behemoth — bombs, warships, missiles, drones, rocket launchers, grenades, guns, tanks, mines — is entirely constructed to kill life, something that occurs uniquely on Earth and no-one can bring back. The existence of this industry should inspire more heated opposition but over the years, as slavery and colonialism grew — powered by gunpowder, an early MIC pillar — many were made accustomed to the idea that it was some- how sane for these weapons to exist, simply to steal others’ wealth and lives. Often, such violence came with more than bombs and beatings — it carried an army of beguilement, which subtly underscored ‘the white man’s burden’, teaching everyone English while robbing them senseless. Somewhere, between Shakespeare and civilities, colonial parties and their amenities, the reality that all this was based on pulverising life got blurred. It took Mahatma Gandhi to turn the focus back on the truth of such modernity

**CAT-PERSON:** The iconic Holly Golightly finally only wanted her cat

— this was founded on violence alone. Only a rejection of that — with the good life it seduced many into — could free us.

In contemporary times, other industries turn violence banal. Think of the Iraq War of 1991, live coverage of which brought the sight of missiles and howitzers into our homes. Images, wrote Roland Barthes, carry more than one meaning — while American broadcasters may have wanted to convey the war’s scale, these images, oft-repeated, had another effect. They carried what Barthes called the ‘third meaning’, an interpretation not always intended by, say, a movie director or actors but nonetheless understood by a viewer. Here, the ‘third meaning’ became the repetitiveness of violence, continuous cycles of shots which dulled our shock, images of heavy machinery which blurred the real lives underneath them. We grew visually accustomed to war’s violence — and that strange tolerance continues today as the world swings, pendulum-like, between the ‘on-off’ quality of the war on Iran.

However, while humans at least know why missiles come raining down, some suffer their blows but never understand why. Think of the animals, birds and plants killed or hurt in war — there are few reports of their lives. Animals forced

into ‘military service’ are somewhat better counted. Hence, we know eight million horses were killed in World War One, multiple camels, elephants, mules, carrier birds, etc., ‘enlisted’, army dogs served with bullets lodged by their heart, every animal experiencing poison gas, shelling and landmines. Pets had it no better. In World War Two, the British euthanised 7,50,000 of their domestic dogs and cats in one week, fearing food shortages — in the mind-boggling act of making evil ordinary, this was called a ‘humane’ gesture.

One wonders how that would go down today, given changes in the ways humans perceive pets. First, the word ‘pet’ no longer means only an animal we own — it could be a neighbourhood dog or cat whom kindly souls protect.

Second, few now call themselves ‘owner’ of a pet — from a feudalistic tone (akin to ‘Meet my tiger’), we have become ‘pet parents’ to Lucy, Snoopy or Muffin. The market for pet products — everything from pet balms to pet-friendly hotels — has expanded to \$165 billion in the US, rising steadily from \$3.6 billion in India as Indians become parents to over 32 million pets.

Now imagine a world where your pet is placed amidst war — think of the fear, confusion and lack of knowledge your innocent little one would go through, not even knowing why the lovely skies were suddenly blown apart. Imagine the physical pain and emotional suffering of an animal injured in war — and its loneliness if its family is gone, the starvation it faces with no-one to feed it, the misery of seeing its home destroyed.

It doesn’t bear thinking about.

**HE SAID IT:** ‘The greatness of a nation = how its animals are treated’



Perhaps one way to make wars seem less normal, then, is to view them from the imagination of a pet. They are, after all, beings to whom we show our softest, most tender selves. Even the hard-edged social aspirant Holly Golightly, played beautifully by Audrey Hepburn in ‘Breakfast at Tiffany’s’ was made humane by the pet she impudently called ‘Cat’, finding she could forsake diamonds but not that little being. Our pets bring out our most pure love. Why not oppose wars that hurt them?

That brings me to the third industry which normalises violence — non-vegetarian food. Every day, millions of animals are culled in the global fight to get you your daily hamburger. This cruelty — animals kept in suffocating, painful conditions, injected with chem-

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icals, ill-fed and physically harmed before being shoved into terrifying slaughterhouses — is smoothly veiled. You literally cannot see the blood or tears in the commercial sleight of hand Marshall Berman wrote of in ‘All That Is Solid Melts Into Air’. The daily genocide of animals truly becomes air — all we see is a pizza with strips of a once-living being.

What does that do to our sense and sensibility? Does such violence, nestled at our breakfast table, play a role in the ethical chloroform we seemingly inhale when it comes to Iran, Sudan or Gaza? Can we really proclaim

values like peace while chomping a leg piece? Do we actually stand for anything good — mainly, the protection of the cosmologies of life, beauty and wonder we Earthlings are blessed with — if we fall for the thrills of chicken wings?

The reason we think less about these questions is because in democratic living, the delicate world of ethics is pushed aside by the burly power of having a vote. That means perforce only human issues receive any attention — and the world of animals, so richly loved in Indian tradition, from the Panchatantra to the Jatakas, is ignored under heaps of elections and shrieks of politicians. Yet, if any nation can, India — home of the most advanced philosophies about the animal world — could change the tide. What if, for instance, we had a Rajya Sabha MP who spoke only for animals, birds and plants? Would we listen — and could we change?

*Views are personal*



**HOW DO WE DO THIS TO THEM?** In WWII, as today, dogs were made to detect mines, often getting hurt