



The burden of remembrance

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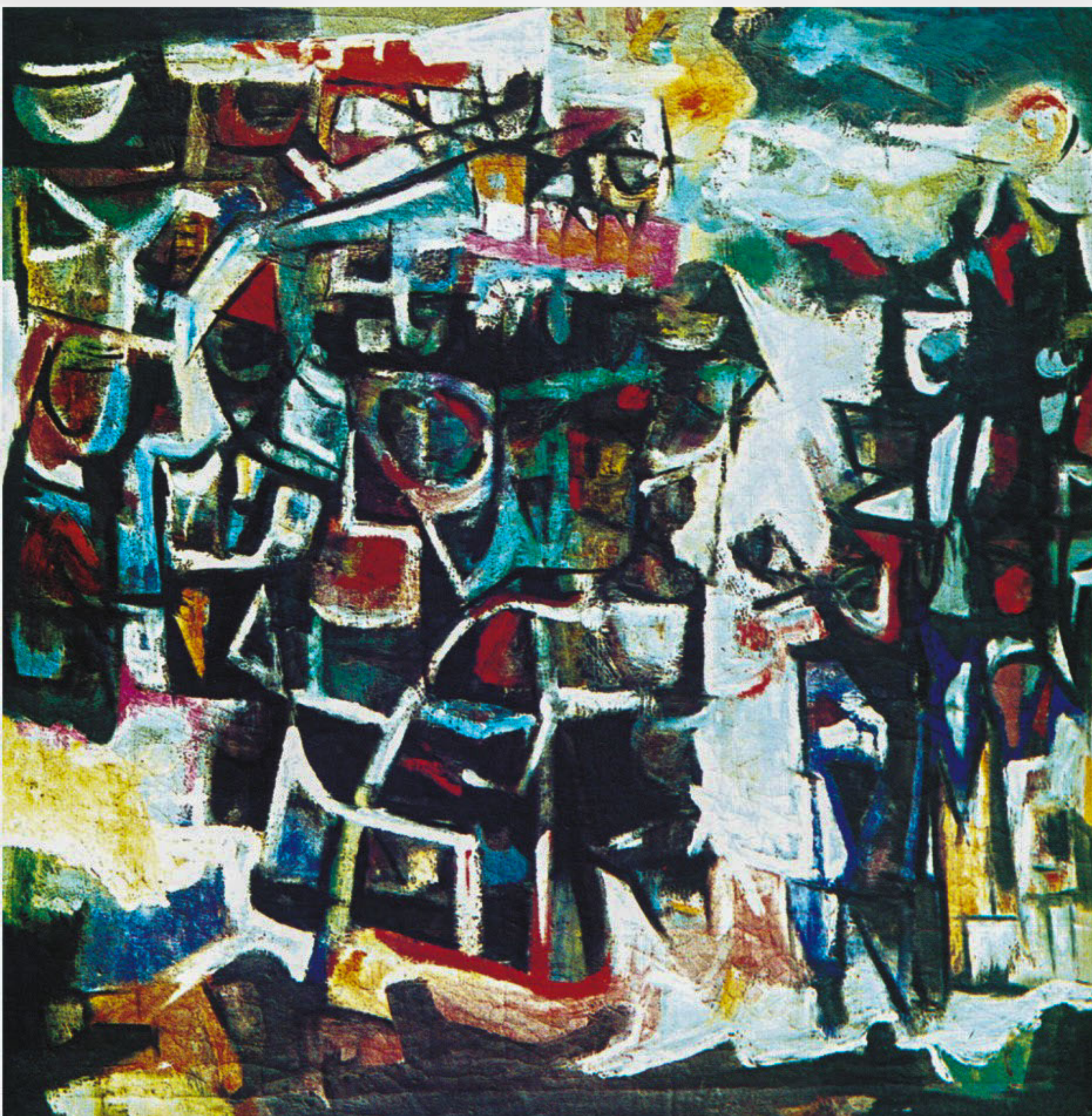
WHEN history is malleable, when it can be made to fit whatever version we want it to, then the cynical definition of history as the version of events written by the victor prevails. What good is the record of things past when that past can be changed whenever necessary? And then we forget why history is important.

One would assume that the history of a comparatively new nation such as ours

in 14 countries of the EU. The perpetrators of the Jewish Holocaust — Austria, Germany, Hungary, and Romania — not only ban the denial of the systematic extermination of Jews during World War II, but also criminalise the elements associated with Nazism. This will not bring back the millions dead, but it constitutes owning up to history. They know what Nazism did, and in remembrance of the killed, they criminalise denial of the deaths.

But the Turkish government, on the

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Memories of Liberation War 2, Oil on Canvas, Debdas Chakraborty

would have been preserved properly, that in this very country we would not have deniers of genocide. But we do. And maybe this modern disregard for what's past seems innocent as people shrug off the burden of those who died in the nine months of the liberation war, but we need not look back far to see the consequences of forgetting one's own history.

The Armenian Genocide is all but forgotten to world history it seems. Said to be the direct precursor to the Jewish Holocaust, the Armenian Genocide was carried out by the Ottoman Turks in 1915, when they slaughtered 1.5 million Christian Armenian men, women and children. What Talaat Pasha ordered would be echoed a few years later in the Jewish Holocaust of the 1940s, when six million Jews and about five million non-Jewish people would be killed through mass murder, deportation or gassed in concentration camps. And yet the two events are remembered very differently today.

Genocide and holocaust denial is illegal

other hand, still denies that the Armenian genocide took place, sometimes to the point of bafflement. Law 301 of the Turkish Penal Code makes it illegal for its citizens to "insult Turkey, the Turkish nation, or Turkish government institutions." In 2007 the Turkish-Armenian journalist Hrant Dink, who was critical of the government's denial of the Holocaust, was shot and killed on the doorsteps of his newspaper. Before that, he was charged with 'anti-Turkishness' through Law 301. The Nobel Laureate Orhan Pamuk, too, was threatened with imprisonment for speaking about the 1915 Holocaust with a Swedish Magazine. All this when the mass graves of the Armenians killed have been found, when documents from that time show what was being done. But Turkey is adamant that the Holocaust did not happen and that's that. Bad luck to the dead Armenians.

If the above makes you angry, your wrath is justified. History, not just one sanitised version fit for school textbooks, but a proper documentation of what

happened, is necessary. Under the Genocide Convention, genocide is the killing of members of a national, ethnic, racial or religious group as such, with intent to destroy the group in whole or in part; it also includes the doing of certain other acts with that intent, including deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about their physical destruction in whole or in part.

With the death sentences of Salauddin Quader Chowdhury and Ali Ahsan Mohammad Mojaheed, we are almost at the end of the trials of the major Razakars who perpetrated what the American Consul Archer Blood was the first to call a genocide. They walked around free in the country for far too long, they denied the killings, and in their deaths the country responsible for pouncing on innocent civilians now pontificates Bangladesh on the need for better relations, still refusing to accept the barbarity they had unleashed in 1971.

On March 28, Blood's cabled report to the US, titled *Selective Genocide* read, "... with support of the Pak military, non-Bengali Muslims are systematically attacking poor people's quarters and murdering Bengalis and Hindus." In his book, *The Cruel Birth of Bangladesh*, he wrote, "... 'genocide' struck us as applying fully to the naked, calculated and

widespread selection of Hindus for special treatment." His book remains a testament of the days of systematic killing carried out here by Pakistan's military.

In 1972, Audrey Menen described the plight of the women brutally gang-raped and left to die by the Pakistani soldiers. Rape was used as a device for instilling fear. Students were killed and buried in mass graves, and over 10 million refugees fled the borders to India.

The Pakistani journalist Anthony Mascarenhas said of the events of 1971: "There is no doubt whatsoever about the targets of the genocide." He pointed out that those targeted were clearly defined according to religion, ethnicity, gender or social class. Then there were the eyewitness accounts. Take the example of the ghost town Bhurungamari, where, after liberating it, Akhtaruzzaman Mandal, a freedom fighter, found "four women kept locked, two of them completely naked, with signs of torture all over their body."

And the witness accounts go on, from men tortured, killed, buried in mass graves; women were tortured and raped over and over again. And yet Pakistan today denies their role in the systematic targeting of Bangalees and more critically the Hindu population in 1971. Sarmila Bose maintains that the claims of genocide and rape were

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