

THE CHOICE - 'This attack will increase in intensity'

The police were there when Naxals waged war in 1960s-1970s Calcutta. A book shows us how they saw them 'IT IS VERY NATURAL THAT OUR OFFICERS AND MEN ON DUTY AND THEIR FAMILIES WILL BE EAGER TO ENJOY THE FESTIVAL'

HISTORIANS SMILE each time they see Rashomon. In that Kurosawa master piece, they see much of how historiography works. The film's unusual narrative structure, with its conflicting witness accounts, points to the impossibility of obtaining the truth about a single event: in the case of Rashomon, a rape and murder. In the case of an 'event' like the Naxalite violence that engulfed rural and urban West Bengal in the 1970s, the conflict of perspectives has not been less.

Even with time providing us distance, the peasant uprising in 1967 in a north Bengal village called Naxalbari has its various versions — and, therefore, interpretations and inferences. In this valuable collection edited by Ashoke Kumar Mukhopadhyay, one sees the swirling violence that descended on the urban landscape of early-mid- 1970s Calcutta through the eyes of the police.

The Calcutta Police Gazette (CPG), published daily as a tool for internal communication among police personnel at all levels, is not a 'secret' document'. But the extracts in this book, from January 1967 — four months prior to the first violent confrontation that took place between the state police and organised peasants in Naxalbari on May 24 — to December 1975, give us a valuable narrative to how the State, in the form of the police, decided to view and tackle the Naxal menace. It is clear that at first, the approach was largely defensive. "The Durga Puja starts from the 7th instant," reads an item in the CPG of October 3, 1970. "In this National Festival of the Bengalees, it is very natural that our officers and men on duty and their families will be eager to enjoy the festival ... But unfortunately the life of a policemen (sic) to, day in view of the activities of certain groups and anti-socials in the city particularly the Naxalites, need specially be looked after." By 1971, the CPG is giving policemen advice on how to open fire on a riotous mob ("one shall aim low at the time of firing...") as well as hinting at retribution ("Our officers and men shall not forget that the loss of life of any individual officer or man is not only a very big loss to himself, to his family and the co-workers they leave behind but also a very great loss in many ways to the police force as such").

Clearly most of what makes up the internal communication of the CPG is propaganda. The "statement" of arrested Naxal leader Charu Mazumdar (reprinted as an appendix in this book), for instance, mentions how he became "addicted to wine" during his college days and later to "ganja, bhang, opium, charas and siddhi". Why would he want to talk about substance abuse to his jailers at a time when even the writing of such a statement is doubtful considering the state of his health? Also, the facts gleaned from Mazumdar's "confessions" and revelations regarding Naxal strategy and methods of carrying out the "annihilation of the class enemy" prior to his death in police custody seem suspiciously like material that the police had already gathered and had put in the mouth of the Naxal leader.

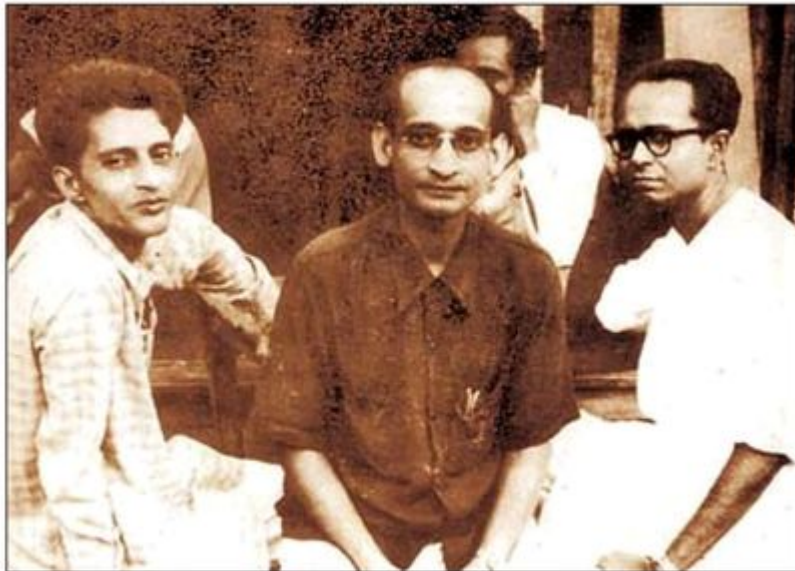
In another appendix, fellow Naxal and editor of the Naxal publication, Liberation, carefully points out the many discrepancies between facts as they would have been known to Mazumdar and what is made evident in Mazumdar's 'unsigned' statement.

But the CPG notifications were not only about demonising Naxal leaders but also

about presenting police brutalities as acts of exemplary courage. Mukhopadhyay points to a notification from the November 29, 1973 issue of the CPG. "On the 9th September, 1971, Shri Ranajit Guha Niyogi arranged a pre-dawn raid on the hideout of extremists of Muraripukur in Eastern Calcutta. As the police party surrounded the bastee ... the extremists opened fire on the police. He then opened fire and hit two of the extremists and killed one of them. He also captured some arms and ammunition." Mukhopadhyay points out that this version ("straight out of a Hollywood action movie") sounds dodgy. He goes on to point out that as per eyewitnesses, the armed police would raid Naxalite hideouts, select some young boys suspected to be Naxalites, "make them stand in a single file and then riddle them with bullets".

The CPG items also point to various facets of police preparation against the "extremists". "The Commissioner of Police commends to all ranks the following excerpts from the book on Communist Insurgency by Robert Thompson [British counter-insurgency expert]," goes a December 3, 1970 item, while others prohibit and restrict the import of 'seditious' publications like Mao Tse Tung Taveel Jang Ke Baare Mein (Urdu), Columbus Plastic Globes and the magazine, China Pictorial. Notices announcing the "brave act" of constables are also regular features.

This important collection brings a new kaleidoscope-twirl to the story of the urban battle raging in a 1970s metropolis. As the Kafkaesque line in one entry sums up, "Avoidable places are to be avoided." thechoice@hindustantimes.com The Naxalites: Through the Eyes of the Police Edited by Ashoke Kumar Mukhopadhyay Dey's Publishing Rs 380, pp 215



POLICE IDENTIFICATION: (Left to right) Naxal leaders Charu Mazumdar, Nripen Bose and Atin Basu in the 1950s