Books

THE NAXALITES THROUGH THE EYE OF THE POLICE: Selective Notifications From the Calcutta Police Gazette 1967-1975 edited by Ashoke Kumar Mukhopadhyay. Dey's, Kolkata, 2006.

IT is now exactly forty years since the incident of Naxalbari in North Bengal heralded a new chapter in the annals of revolutionary movements in post-independent India. Its immediate impact was limited, but the long-term significance of this somewhat chance-erected uprising against state power is beyond dispute. Its reverberations have been so widespread that a new word, the Naxalites, has now got added to the lexicon. As happens all too frequently within the corpus of India's Left, the movement soon fragmented into many parts, as much for ideological reasons as on account of intrusion of subjective factors.

In the beginning the emphasis of its protagonists was on following the original Lin Biao script of choking 'the cities' by encircling them by 'the villages'. One group, led by the original inspirer of the movement, Charu Mazumdar, however, took little time to cross over to the Latin American strategy of urban guerrilla warfare. Calcutta exploded as a result. The tactics experimented with by the insurrectionists included seizing effective control over particular areas of the city, creating an atmosphere of general terror by indiscriminate use of Molotov-type explosives, crudely assembled firearms and similar devices, damaging statues installed at public places of Bengali eminences dubbed as symbols of the bourgeois colonial culture, the forced closing down of educational institutions through selective mayhem and indiscriminate killing of junior police personnel such as constables – particularly the more vulnerable traffic constables – havaldars, sub-inspectors and inspectors. This last-mentioned feature of their operations took the Naxalites away from the tradition of Bengal terrorism established during the freedom movement. In the high noon of revolutionary terrorism in the first three decades of the last century, the armed revolutionaries targeted, and often succeeded, to kill district-magistrates, superintendents of police and similar high-ranking officers of the Raj; the small fry were left out.

Whatever that be, the Naxalites without question succeeded in one major respect. They created large-scale panic in the ranks of the city police. The morale of the Calcutta police force sank to a very low level because of the rampage let loose by the Naxalite hordes. Ashoke Kumar Mukhopadhyay has broken new ground. The Calcutta police authorities had a legacy of issuing a daily gazette for internal circulation amongst its ranks: it was a convenient medium to keep the police personnel regularly informed about postings, promotions, rules and regulations, awards and punishments, and so on. Mukhopadhyay sought and was granted permission to delve into the issues of this gazette over the period between 1967 and 1975. His intent was to gather information on how the Calcutta police

tackled the extraordinary situation the Naxalite insurgency had led to. His enterprise deserves applause, if only because he has established a precedence of citizens' prerogative to pore into confidential police files, and he did not wait for the Right to Information Act to be put on the statute book.

Mukhopadhyay's endeavour has amounted to an exercise in detection. He has succeeded – he himself is sure to agree – only in part. He must have entertained the hope that the contents of the confidential circulars would help him acquire detailed knowledge of the strategy and tactics of counter-insurgency measures the Calcutta police adopted in the period to combat the Naxalites. The extracts from the circular included in the book do indeed capture the flavour of the pervasive fear benumbing the police force at that point of time. The notifications deal extensively on issues of security of police personnel: providing details in regard to how they should protect their arms from sudden snatching, the precautions they should take while they move around, advice and admonition they must address to members of their family so that they do not become victims of sneak attacks, and so on.

The notes and circulars fall into a drab pattern and constitute an abysmally stylised heap. Every now and then, they include mournful references to junior police personnel killed by Naxalite action, and routine narration of the progress of investigations pursued and cases launched in connection of such killings. Every now and then, there is announcement of rewards for valour displayed by police personnel in quelling 'the enemy'. One or two circulars mention punishment accorded to members of the force who had deserted the line of duty.

The circulars occasionally refer to government orders for seizing publications proscribed on the ground that they preached disaffection against the state. Some of these banned and seized publications were stated to have the intention of inciting the people against the government of the United States of America. If China's Chairman could be the chairman of the Naxalites through some dialectical logic, the same logic, the Calcutta police bosses must have thought, should entitle them to protect and defend the interests of the U.S. government. The police, howsoever unintentionally, is capable of providing entertainment though. One of the books forfeited was a Harvard University Press publication, but it dealt with the dangerous issue of social inequalities and class relations.

The only departure in this reportage of hide-bound police proceedings was a notification during the first, very brief spell of the United Front government in West Bengal. This circular inter alia announced the right of policemen to form associations of their own to further their working conditions and career prospects.

It is the primitivity of the state of affairs which takes one aback. Mukhopadhyay's extracts cover the span from late 1960 till the mid-1970s. Even after two full decades following independence, the framework of police administration was firmly rooted to hoary colonial tradition. A vast number of the circulars keep mentioning to the quintessentially colonial Indian Penal Code; the other two statutes interminably quoted from are the Code of Criminal Procedure of 1898 and the Calcutta Police Act, which had

its genesis in 1866. Law and order continued to be enforced in terms of the guidelines laid in these colonial statutes, and were supplemented by the re-promulgation of another piece of imperial legislation, the Bengal Suppression of Terrorist Outrages Act, 1936. The menu of punitive regulatory measures was rounded off by a new statute, the West Bengal Prevention of Violence Act, 1970. There was of course, in addition, the ubiquitous Maintenance of Internal Security Act so dear to the Union government.

The impression therefore refuses to fade away: the police continued to represent an assumed master race and at the receiving end of their dispensations were despicable native subjects. That the police are merely an administrative arm of the government elected by a free people on the basis of adult suffrage was a theme yet to percolate into the system. The policemen were evidently under instruction to commit to memory the details of every clause and section of the Indian Penal Code, the Calcutta Police Act and the Code of Criminal Procedure. In this sea of circulars, there is just one stray entry which is more like a teaser. In the late 1960s, a new Commissioner had taken charge of the Calcutta Police. This individual had intellectual pretensions and used to move about with scholarly looking books in his briefcase. In a circular he issued soon after assuming office, he reproduces a paragraph from a book by one Robert Thompson on the subject of communist insurgency, the purport of which was that, even when dealing with insurgency organised by the communists, the police should not transgress the four corners of law. Perhaps what the Police Commissioner intended to hint was that suggestions of this nature ought to be honoured in the breach.

For precisely during the months following the issue of this notification, the Calcutta police innovated the strategy of what has subsequently come to be known as ‘fake encounters’. Several young people, and even fairly well-known persons such as the poet and journalist Saroj Dutta, disappeared from the face of the earth in this period, victims of the Calcutta police’s anti-insurgency operations. Ruthless annihilation was, the panic-stricken police authorities decided, the only way to put down the Naxalite insurrections. The rule of law was bidden adieu. The circulars do not tell the story, but it was total war and the police did not flinch from adopting the roughest measures to win the war. Other tactics too were on the anvil. For instance, there was heavy infiltration by the police into the ranks of the various Naxalites groups and instigating them against one another. In the final round, para-military forces joined the police to launch indescribably harsh combing operations in city neighbourhoods thought to be infested by the Naxalites, quashing whatever remained of the will of resistance amongst the remnants of Naxalite stragglers.

As is only to be expected, the circulars Mukhopadhyay has reproduced or quoted from say not a word how the police organised raids, what they were supposed to do in face to face encounters with the ‘enemy’, or how to carry on cross-examination of those arrested. And of course torture in police custody and indiscriminate use of third degree methods – practices which even as late as today police personnel are reluctant to dispense with – are non-occurrences, if one were to go by the evidence of these circulars. Typically, while there are profuse references to awards given to policemen for bravery exhibited in the line of duty, no details are proffered of the specific nature of the ‘bravery’.

Mukhopadhyay's compilation, therefore, proves its worth in a somewhat unusual way. It clinches the suspicion that, even in the post-independence phase, the police apparatus did not shed its colonial mind-set. It offers enlightenment on yet another matter: whatever their other infirmities, the police were no fools, they did not believe in leaving evidence in print. The situation, one fears, has not changed in the last three or four decades either.

A special reason exists for extolling Mukhopadhyay's efforts. The Appendix to the volume should turn it into a modest bestseller. Charu Mazumdar, the patron saint of the Naxalite movement, was arrested on 16 July 1972 from a flat in central Calcutta; he was a very sick man, suffering from chronic cardiac asthma along with other complications. He died, in police custody, within ten days of his arrest. But, according to an entry which Mukhopadhyay must have come across in some issue of the Police Gazette, this very ailing, about-to-die person had, in the course of these ten days, volunteered to make a statement to the police, running easily to ten thousand words, offering exhaustive details of the organizational structure of the insurrectionary party, the number and nature of party cells, minutes of the proceeding of various secret meetings of the cells, names of individuals who attended each of these meetings, the background of the emergence of factions within the movement, the modalities of fund-raising and communications by party members, and so on; all your queries with respect to the movement will be satisfied once you have the opportunity to read the statement. It is a fantastically coherent, but equally fantastically absurd, document.

What is of equal or even greater import, it was not signed by Charu Mazumdar. One can here only indulge in speculation. Perhaps a group of zealous police officers put together bits and pieces of whatever information about the movement they had collected till then from different sources, contributed some further inputs that were products of their own imagination and, finally, added material which could prove helpful to frame people of the police's choosing. By attributing such a statement to a safely dead Charu Mazumdar, conceivably the Calcutta police's objective was two-fold: to discredit Mazumdar and, at the same time, demoralise his as-yet-fiercely loyal followers. Mukhopadhyay adds a postscript to the purported Mazumdar statement in which a close colleague of Mazumdar, Suniti Kumar Ghosh, tears to shreds the police claim on the veracity of the statement.

The final surprise presented by Ashoke Kumar Mukhopadhyay is a set of rare photographs from the family album preserved by Charu Mazumdar's daughter. One of the photographs is a veritable gem, demonstrating how opposites might meet. The picture must have been taken sometime in the 1950s when S.A. Dange was visiting Siliguri and spending the night at Mazumdar's place: it shows a demure-looking Dange, a modest Bengali *dhoti* tucked round his waist, a bashful smile on his face, sitting next to Mazumdar's mother, Mazumdar himself standing right behind. Another picture is of Utpal Dutt and Tapas Sen in the company of a *lungi*-clad Charu Mazumdar: a sort of a memento of the brief ultra-revolutionary phase of these luminaries of the Little Theatre Group. All of them are now gone; the banquet hall, if it was ever that, is deserted.

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