

# Book review by Sumanta Banerjee [Parabaas Reviews]

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Naxalism-- Views from the other side

Sumanta Banerjee



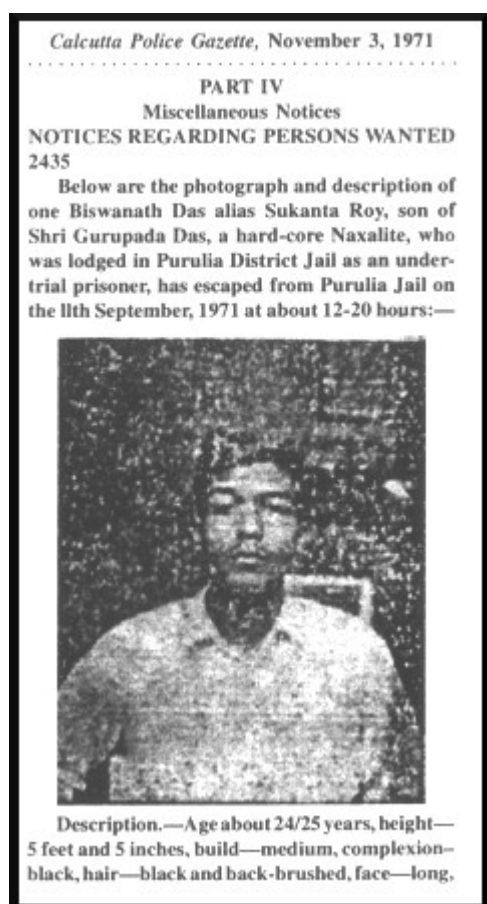
**THE NAXALITES: THROUGH THE EYES OF THE POLICE.** *Select notifications from the Calcutta Police Gazette. 1967-1975.*, Edited by Ashoke Kumar Mukhopadhyay; Dey's Publishing, Kolkata, India; 2006; P. 215; ISBN:81-295-0696-3

This book appears at the right time. The Indian state is today besieged again by the spectre of Naxalism – in its new incarnation as the CPI(Maoist). The Maoists hold sway over a long stretch of territory that is wider than the isolated pockets in India that were occupied by their predecessors, the Naxalites, in 1967-75 – the period covered by the present book. Selections from the contemporary police records brought together within the covers of the book, pose three challenges for the policy makers. One, the state can adopt the short-term measure of intensive police operations to suppress a localized Naxalite insurgency (in which it was successful in Calcutta in the 1970s). Two, even after such suppression in one part of the country, the state will continue to face similar insurgencies in other parts (as evident from the spread of the armed Maoist movement from Bihar in the north, across parts of Orissa, Chhattisgarh, Maharashtra, and down to Andhra Pradesh and Tamilnadu in the south during the last several decades). Three, instead of resorting to police operations, the state can use the democratic and humanitarian option of addressing the basic concerns of the people that have given rise to the Maoist insurgency, and enter into a dialogue with the Maoists.

At least three books, looking at the Naxalite movement in Bengal through the eyes of the police, have appeared in the market till now – one by Amiya Kumar Samanta, who was a senior officer in the Intelligence Branch of the West Bengal police in 1974-75, later to become the Deputy Inspector General of Police in the Central Reserve Police Force of the state; the second by Ranjit Kumar Gupta, who was the Commissioner of Police of Calcutta from 1970 till 1971, later to become the Inspector General of Police of West Bengal. Both have given their versions of the tumultuous events of that period, as experienced by them in their official positions. Their accounts are often marred by a rather biased interpretation based on a selective approach, and are therefore – despite full of historically important data – likely to be judged as partisan. The last one, published very recently and therefore would be mentioned here without any comments, is titled *Maoist 'Spring Revolution'*. Its author Arun Prosad Mukherjee was posted in Naxalbari in 1967 as a senior police officer.

The present book stands out in contrast from these two books, since the editor Ashoke

Mukhopadhyay is no stakeholder in the controversy over the merits or demerits of the Naxalite movement. He is a corporate communications professional, but likes to spend his spare time on researching and delving into old police records – pertaining both to the pre-Independence militant nationalist movement and the Naxalite period. It is this academic interest of his that has led him to collect the relevant documents of that period from the Calcutta police archives, and bring them out in the shape of the present book. He refrains from attempting any personal interpretation of the events, and prefers to leave it to the readers to draw their own conclusions from the various notifications that were periodically issued by the authorities in the Calcutta Police Gazette (CPG), a daily official publication that was intended for circulation among all police officers and their subordinates. In his introduction, Mukhopadhyay humbly acknowledges that he is not claiming to uncover secret documents from Home (Political) files, “which might have tracked and recorded various aspects of the Naxalite movement in the city and related individuals in a more insightful manner.” The CPG, on the other hand, is a public document, circulated far and wide among police cadres at all levels. The contents of the daily issues of CPG of those days (1967-75) reveal, in Mukhopadhyay’s words: “the various contours of the police policy, ranging from an initially defensive mindset to a subsequent flurry of activities in building up a team to cope with the crisis...”



### *A CPG notification*

The CPG notifications, as quoted in the book, do indeed throw an interesting light on the social and political life of Calcutta of those days. The city was passing through a historically critical period. The 1967 state assembly elections in West Bengal for the first time broke the monopoly of Congress rule and in March that year brought to power a united front government consisting of ex-Congressmen and Left parties. Soon after, in Naxalbari, peasants under the leadership of dissident sections of the CPI(M) (who were soon to break away and form a separate party) occupied lands on which they had been working without getting their due share from the landlords, cancelled hypothecary debts which had bound them to work for the landlords without wages, and formed armed groups to drive out the landlords and set up parallel administration. Alarmed by the turn of events, the newly elected chief minister Ajoy Mukherjee (an ex-Congressman) issued a statement on May 16, where referring to “disturbing reports” of forceful occupation of land, he said that his government was “determined to take strong steps against the

law-breakers and instructions have been issued to the police and concerned Government officials to take appropriate action in each such case.” Following this, a police force raided a village in Naxalbari on May 23, and in a clash with armed peasants a policeman was killed. Two days later, the police retaliated by firing upon a crowd of villagers in the area killing nine, including six women and two children. On May 30, the CPG published the May 16 instructions of Ajoy Mukherjee for general guidance of the police. From then onwards, there was no looking back, and the CPG became a regular medium for conveying reports of daily happenings in Calcutta in the aftermath of the Naxalbari uprising and for issuing necessary guidelines for the police to tackle the situation.

As events began to move at a fast pace from the late 1960s, the role of the Calcutta police acquired a new dimension. Although till 1968, Calcutta remained comparatively free from violent Naxalite activities (which were mainly concentrated in the countryside), increasing trade union agitations in the city kept the Calcutta police busy – as evident from the CPG circulars. Further, following the dismissal of the United Front Government by the Centre in November 1967, a civil disobedience movement by the ousted United Front all throughout 1968 invited police intervention. Fresh elections in February 1969 brought back the United Front to power. In April the same year, the Naxalites officially announced the formation of their party – the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) – in Calcutta. Henceforward, Calcutta was to become the centre from where they began to publish and circulate their literature. Significantly, one of the first anti-Naxalite steps to be taken by the Calcutta police was to forfeit these publications – in accordance with orders issued by the Delhi administration in July that year. The CPG of September 18, 1969 issued a notification by the Deputy Commissioner of police of the Special Branch, Calcutta, quoting the orders forfeiting copies of LIBERATION, the Naxalite monthly organ carrying articles by Charu Mazumdar and others. Thus, from the very beginning of the anti-Naxalite operations, the Calcutta police targeted both the communication media and the armed wing of the rebels. The latter became the main threat in 1970, following the first congress of the CPI(M-L) in May that year, which called upon its followers to launch attacks on the police, seize their arms and build up an arsenal. The response to this call by the youth in the city caught the Calcutta police off-guard. The CPG issues of 1970 make interesting reading – revealing the extent of widescale attacks on policemen and the panic that gripped the force. Almost every issue mourned the death of policemen, either stabbed or gunned down or killed in bomb explosions. By the end of October 1970, at least twenty five policemen were killed, and three hundred and fifty injured in these urban actions. Their bosses while expressing sympathy for the loss of their colleagues, also berated them for negligence of duties. Thus R.K. Gupta, the newly appointed Commissioner of Police (who was to write later a book on the Naxalite movement that has been referred to at the beginning of this review), in one of his orders complained: “Very often it is found that officers and men on duty though equipped with firearms, gas guns, steel helmets, etc., they stand or sit in such a way that the behaviour of the force betrays lack of alertness. In the morning it is a common sight that picket force sits on the ledge of the premises or on the footpath reading newspapers and books.” He then ordered that “the officers on whom the responsibility of keeping the deployed force alert, as indicated in course of instructions, do their jobs properly.” (CPG, July 28, 1970). Analyzing the state of affairs of the Calcutta police during those days, Ashoke Mukhopadhyay, the compiler of the present volume rightly points out: “In fact all the seven signs of alarm – surprise, insufficient information, escalating events, loss of control, increased outside scrutiny, siege mentality, pance – that appear at a crisis situation could be traced in the City Police organization....”

The next few years saw the police regaining their ground in Calcutta – thanks to a number of measures undertaken by the authorities. First, several draconian laws were either revived or enacted to arm the police with indiscriminate powers with impunity (e.g. West Bengal Prevention of Violent Activities Bill of 1970, Maintenance of Internal Security Act of 1971). Secondly, the police force was toned up with the imposition of strict discipline and control over their movements. Thus, the redoubtable police commissioner R.K.Gupta felt compelled to issue an order denying his men and their families even normal entertainment: “Going to cinemas, theatres or in such functions where officers and men are to stay for a considerable period of time, should be avoided. In this regard even if the family members are insistent, they should be

dissuaded from such simple desires of theirs....” (CPG, October 22, 1970). Thirdly, the police were encouraged to liquidate Naxalites through ‘encounters’ – a catchword invented to palm off unilateral extra-judicial killing of suspects as an outcome of a fierce battle between the police and the Naxalites ! The publicity department of the Calcutta police circulated highly exaggerated reports of such false encounters in the newspapers. Thirdly, policemen who scored points in such ‘encounters’, were amply rewarded by the authorities. Thus, we find the CPG of November 29, 1973 announcing the award of the police medal for gallantry to sub-inspector Ranajit Guha Neogy for killing a Naxalite on September 9, 1971, praising him for displaying “exemplary courage and devotion to duty at a great personal risk.”

Those at the receiving end of the bravery of Guha Neogy (who acquired notoriety as a brutal torturer in the interrogation cell of the Lalbazar police headquarters of Calcutta in the 1970s) and survived his atrocities have a different story to tell – how his force used to raid Naxalite hideouts, select some young boys, make them stand in a single file and then riddle them with bullets. The fourth factor that helped the police to regain control was the dissension within the leadership and ranks of the Naxalite movement, which confounded its original ideological motive and blunted its militancy.

By 1973, the city police was feeling more secure and had begun to describe the situation in Calcutta as normal. Although sporadic Naxalite actions (e.g. attacks on police stations or snatching of arms from traffic police constables) continued for sometime in 1974, the imposition of the Emergency in 1975 sealed the fate of the Naxalite movement in Calcutta, with the police being successful in eliminating the leadership and cadres and putting behind bars thousands of their supporters. The narrative in the present compilation thus brings to an end a major phase in the history of Calcutta’s political and social life – giving us a rare peep into the psyche of the police top brass and their minions.



(From L): Kumkum Bhattacharya, Nirmal Guha Roy,  
Utpal Dutt, Charu Mazumdar, Pabitra  
Sengupta, Tapas Sen and Souren Bose

But besides the revelations brought out by the sequence of CPG documents, the present book offers the readers another unique piece of information in the form of two appendices. The first is the full text of an unsigned statement that was alleged to have been made by Charu Mazumdar in police custody after his arrest on July 16, 1972, and the second the comments made on that statement by Suniti Kumar Ghosh (a comrade of Mazumdar’s in the 1970s) who was interviewed by Ashoke Mukhopadhyay in the course of his compiling the CPG documents for the present book. A reading of the two would reveal to the readers how so-called confessions or statements made by prisoners in police custody are manufactured to suit the case of the prosecution. Words were put in the mouth of Charu Mazumdar, which were found to be unauthenticated and historically improbable and inconsistent. Suniti Ghosh, in a blow by blow account, tears to shreds the police-manufactured statement of Charu Mazumdar’s, countering it with facts from his own experience. Referring to the statement, Ghosh says: “I have gone through it several times. I am sure this is a concoction of the police variety, which has four main ingredients: 1. fruits of investigation by police intelligence (the base of which was formed by ill-paid, semi-literate or illiterate men), which was of a low level and the results of which were of a very inferior

type; 2. gleanings from statements of persons already arrested...; 3. certain things that Charu Babu said to the police in the course of long interrogation; and 4. inventions of fertile police brains.” These observations by a veteran revolutionary should be a warning to those research scholars of today who are too eager to use as their primary sources the so-called confessions and statements left by prisoners in police custody – whether in the pre-Independence militant national movement, or the post-Independence armed Communist movement.

Ashoke Mukhopadhyay has produced an immensely valuable book through years of painstaking research, by bringing together important official documents that throw light on the strategy and tactics adopted by the Calcutta police to cope with one of the biggest political and military challenges in its history. The compilation will remain a major source of information for future historians of the Naxalite movement.

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Reviewed by **Sumanta Banerjee**. Author of many books on society and culture, Sumanta Banerjee (b.1936) also has .... [\(more\)](#)

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