

# Rat's Meat, Anyone?

## MY YEARS IN AN INDIAN PRISON MARY TYLER



THE BOOK THAT SHOOK THE INDIANS

So much is being written about political prisoners in India these days, that the layman might succumb to the temptation of focusing more on the issue than on its human aspect. Jayaprakash Narayan's Prison Diary, as well as that of Snehlata Reddy, for instance, have offered some glimmer of the goings-on behind India prison walls. Rarely however has there been truly emphatic and empathetic writing on the mental, physical, and ideological situation a political prisoner finds himself in.

Mary Tyler's book, *My Years In An Indian Prison*, therefore, comes at an extremely appropriate stage in the nation's education in human rights, and in the context of human

degradation that has occurred, traditionally, in Indian prisons. Apart from the fact that the book is a British publication (Victor Gollancz Ltd., London, 1977; 191 pp; £5.20) and consequently well-produced (except for a few proofing errors toward the end) what strikes the reader as he leafs initially through the book is that Tyler does not lace her narrative with excessive color, or lurid "best selling techniques"—something that is resorted to unabashedly by the dozens of Indian magazines and journals that are revealing "excess" after "excess".

From the very beginning, Tyler takes care to point out that her book is not intended to "relate in detail or to attempt to analyze the subsequent development of the 'Naxalite' movement". This is refreshing, for Tyler, who was arrested in June 1970 in the Singbhum District of Bihar, and charged with being a Naxalite, and who spent the ensuing five years, until July 1975, in prison, might logically be expected to discuss "Naxalism" in some detail. Instead, she concentrates on her prison life, on its human side. Unspectacular in idiom, at times tinged with the patience of an explanatory schoolteacher (which Tyler was in England prior to her Indian phase) the book comes through as a moving testimony to the nobility of India's poorer classes, those sociological guinea-pigs.

The manner in which Tyler meets Amalendu Sen, later to be her husband, seems straight out of a storybook. In the mix-Sixties, Amalendu, then an engineering trainee working in West Germany, meets Mary on a vacation train in Europe. The relationship soon intensifies, more so because the two share views on political and social questions. Tyler, in addition, is immensely interested in India, particularly in the country's problem of poverty. Amalendu returns to India in 1967; two years later, Mary sets out on a six-month overland trip to this country, arriving in Calcutta, and meeting Amalendu once again, in late January 1970.

No ordinary tourist she, Tyler's instinctive affection for India and for the country's problems gains in weight as she tours the tourist spots

of the subcontinent. Her holiday about to end, she begins wondering how to translate her interest into helpful action. "If you really want to help in some way, why don't you stay here with us?" asks a friend of Amalendu's. So it is that Tyler stays on in India. Amalendu and she get married in April 1970, and hardly two months later, they are arrested in a Bihar village, charged with being Naxalites, rioting with deadly weapons, causing an affray, armed robbery, and attempted murder. (Later, more charges are tacked on to this list—"wandering in the jungle, in possession of subversive pamphlets and some acid in a plastic bottle (sic)", and waging war against the State). Altogether, fifty people are picked up by the police the same day in the same area in what evidently is an arbitrary round-up of "suspicious elements". Obviously, some police official has had to gain favor in higher circles.

The infinitely slow manner in which Tyler's case is treated by the authorities illustrates the axiom that the law is an ass, never more so than in India. What is memorable about the book is that as the final chapter nears, the reader is so caught up in the narrative, that the later incidents of prisoners being humiliated, ill-treated, and ignored by callous prison officials evoke little emotion—rather, a dull, aching awareness of the monstrosity of the system hangs over the reader. For those of us who have proudly defended India's traditions of peaceful and non-violent ways of life, *My Years* will prove to be a cathartic experience—for, shorn of artfulness, Tyler brings images of Nazi-type concentration camps, and of names like Dachau and Auschwitz, back to mind. Her experiences in Hazaribagh Central Jail, and later in Jamshedpur Central Jail, make one wonder whether, below a veneer of civilization, India has not always been a scant step away from being a police State.

Leaving aside the more disturbing passages in the book, Tyler exhibits increasing familiarity with the people and the situations she meets up with. Afforded slightly better treatment than the other prisoners in the female ward (which is presided over by a trusty who is always referred to as the *matine* in a vaguely naval manner) due more to her nationality and education, and to periodic and lackluster visits from



officials of the British High Commission. Tyler nevertheless goes out of her way to befriend her fellow-prisoners, and to involve herself in their prison life. This conmingling proves helpful to her on more than one occasion, for the prisoners exhibit an amazing degree of cooperation and solidarity in the face of repeated harassment by the prison officials.

There are many accounts of individual prisoners, some heroic, some apathetic, some deranged from continuing captivity, some condemned to astonishingly wrongful imprisonment. The charges on which most of Tyler's fellow-prisoners have been arrested range from the ridiculous to the profound. One woman kills her daughter because she had had an affair with a young rake in her village, with the inevitable pregnancy. Another, a farm laborer, is arrested by police when her employer's rival complains to the authorities that his land has been trespassed upon. Such insights into the minds and hearts of the prisoners, all of whom are extremely poor, will serve to fill many gaps in the Indians' own knowledge of their lesser brethren, removed as they are from their urbanized ivory towers. Kalpana, a middle-class Bengali girl who provides Tyler with much-needed companionship in the early stages of her incarceration; Bina, another Untouchable whom Tyler teaches to read and write; Moti, a mentally unstable old woman who raves and rants at her captors—such people help to make Tyler's story a unique event.

Survival is of paramount importance, and Tyler quickly comes to realize the imperatives of survival. The prisoners, who are given meager and worm-infested rations, save up most of their quota to sell to greedy, profiteering warders. And why? Because every rupee is priceless in prison; because many of the women, after their release, would have to "purchase" their status (*izzat*) back from their villages, usually by hosting a feast for their fellow-villagers, or by giving donations to the village Brahmins! And this, in secular and minorities-conscious India.

The manner in which the prison authorities operate would turn many strong stomachs. No official has seen the Prison Manual; when Tyler, conscious of words like "prisoners' rights" and "regulations", demands to see it, she is told there is no copy of it at Hazaribagh. Cor-

ruption is rife—in order to visit a prisoner, his or her relatives have to bribe everyone from the guard at the gate to the warder in the prison office. The injustice, the inhumanity of it all, percolates through, strongly, to the reader. On one occasion, when a particularly greedy warder is transferred to Patna (Bihar's capital city) Tyler congratulates him, tongue-in-cheek, on his "promotion", and tells him that he can meet all the "top people" there. His reply is unhesitating: "What do I want with the top people? It's the poor I get my money from."

And so, like Crusoe on his desert island, Tyler quickly learns the mathematics of existence. The concern and the affection that her fellow-prisoners lavish on her touch her immensely. Once, deprived of proper food, she falls violently ill. Her friends hover protectively around her, and tell her: "You are a long way from home, and that is making you feel worse. But you must remember that now we are your mother, your sister, your family. We will take care of you."

Under Tyler's intelligent tutelage, the other women prisoners gradually realize that they must fight for every little concession from the jail authorities. Once, when they are not supplied with soap for over a month, they go on a protest hunger strike. The authorities break their mud hearth, and take away twigs, paper and even dry leaves, "hoping that the women would quarrel among themselves and blame each other for the loss of these 'privileges'". They do not do so, and get the soap. Tyler's education continues: "...little by little, we shall invent and improvise until they come to uproot and destroy everything again."

Innovation and improvisation also mean, one monsoon when rice stocks fall low and food is late, that the prisoners have to look around for other things to eat. They settle on the rats that are forced out of their burrows by the rain. After a lot of persuasion, Tyler manages, one day, "...to swallow a couple of pieces (of rat curry); it tasted little different from the frogs' legs I had eaten in France, or indeed from rabbit."

Tyler's case is finally taken up for hearing on June 23 1975; on her insistence, her case is not treated separately (a "deal" offered by the Indian Government in order to "faci-

litate" her early repatriation to Britain) but together with her "co-accused", many of whom are young men who display amazing pluck, cheerfulness, and hope. It may only be a coincidence, that the Emergency is declared the same week by Mrs. Indira Gandhi. Suddenly, in the midst of sleepy proceedings in a Jamshedpur courtroom, Tyler is told on July 4 1975 that the case against her has been "withdrawn". Ironically, the Prosecution's petition states that the case is being withdrawn "on grounds of inexpediency"! Tyler's continued detention, the authorities suddenly realize, would "be prejudicial to the good relations between two Commonwealth countries, India and Britain."

So the story ends. Tyler leaves behind Amalendu, Kalpana, Bina, Moti, and her other friends; she is flown on a British Airways plane to London. It is clear that the parting is wrenching for her. It is also made clear by the Indian officials that her return would not be viewed with approval. She leaves behind, too, the Indian authorities' attitudes toward the "Naxalite prisoners". "Why don't all you Naxalites rot and die in jail? I'm fed up with all of you," says the Hazaribagh Jail Superintendent, when Tyler asks earlier on that her case be transferred to Jamshedpur.

Without doubt, one ends up feeling very sympathetic, and extremely concerned, about the Naxalite question, whatever one's political beliefs may be—because the question here is not one of ideology, but of human beings who are treated no better than in Solzhenitzyn's Gulag. Between Tyler's lines, one realizes that the Warsaw Pact, the Helsinki Convention, and the U.N. Charter of Human Rights are all so much parchment, to be ignored by governments that forego and forget the fundamental tenets of human decency. That such violations should occur in India should make many intelligent people in this country hang their heads in shame; that a Britisher had to undergo these abominations at the Indians' hands, and then wrote about them, should be cause for an examination of the very social structure Indians are surrounded by. Tyler may not go down as another Solzhenitzyn, but she will at least go down as a very brave person, and a person who has helped awaken many sleeping consciences.

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