



Nightmarch: among India's revolutionary guerrillas

Gavin Smith

To cite this article: Gavin Smith (2019): Nightmarch: among India's revolutionary guerrillas, The Journal of Peasant Studies

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2019.1637044>



Published online: 12 Aug 2019.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

BOOK REVIEW

Nightmarch: among India's revolutionary guerrillas, by Alpa Shah, London, Hurst & Co/Chicago, Chicago University Press/New Delhi, Harper Collins, 2019, 320 pp., US \$25.00 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-2265-9033-2

The most striking feature of this book is that it is simultaneously a major contribution to scholarship and at the same time written to entice a wider readership to care about the poor and their insurgent politics. It arrives fifty years after another anthropologist writing about rural resistance was likewise moved to step out of the academy and write for a broader audience. Scarcely could the perspective and style of *Nightmarch* be more distinct from *Wolf's Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century* (1969). Yet both books were written for the purpose of understanding the world so as to change it. The question arises then: what was it that moved Wolf to write the kind of book he did and how has a similar urge resulted in the kind of book that Alpa Shah has written?

One might begin by asking: how is one to understand guerrilla insurgency aimed at revolutionary change? Such a question needs asking whatever one's views of the practice, since to take any position assumes a certain understanding: what it is, what it does, what it might achieve, its collateral damage and so on. The same is true whether one is a participant or an observer, and in the latter case, one touched by its proximity or gazing – metaphorically perhaps – from afar, in scholarly assessment. Yet the urgency attached to such a question has surely changed over those fifty years. When *Peasant Wars* appeared, leverage towards positive social change through rural insurgency was seriously considered on the left for which the initial rebellion in Naxalbari two years earlier is evidence (despite Che's defeat in October of that year). This is no longer the case. As the possibilities have declined, the way one might go about the task of 'understanding' has changed too. How we go about our enquiries and the form their presentation takes are a function of what David Scott would call the 'the problem space' (see Hall 2019, 309). Since Wolf wrote, perhaps the inscription on Marx's grave might need to be reversed then.¹ The point may now be less to tackle guerrilla insurgency's potential for societal change and instead find other means for understanding its practitioners. *Nightmarch* is an extraordinary and powerful response to such a challenge.

In the words of the author, the book 'is a meditation on the contradictions, limitations and paradoxes of emancipatory ambitions, revolutionary desires and guerrilla action' (xxi), which is a pretty good description of *Nightmarch's* achievements. But this is not to say that it doesn't follow a particular path in pursuit of such an understanding, one which seeks '... to know and experience the world through their perspectives' (xix). To do this, the book is interwoven along two lines.

First there's the actual night march itself, involving a seven-day trek with a contingent of Naxalite guerrillas in 2010 from a meeting of the State-level committee of Maoists in Bihar back to the area of Shah's original fieldsite in Jharkhand. Taking us with her on the physically challenging and at moments truly terrifying experience of the march, Shah shares with us her self-interrogation as she pursues her persistent questions in search of an understanding of 'their perspectives'. Through these page-turning depictions, we get to know a number of very different personalities and their varying rationales and emotions vis-à-vis their

¹The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it'.

participation in the struggle. We learn, too, about the physical environment that conditions their life from one day to the next. In so doing, we get a sense of the 'edges' of the *guerrilla*² – its embedding in the locality and its interface with the state. All this the reader gets via the experience-near sense of the march that Shah conveys through her limpid prose – our ease of reading obscuring, perhaps, the carefully structured form the narrative takes.

The puzzles Shah sets herself at the outset, for example, turn into far more sophisticated enigmas as her initial questions get threaded into more complex patterns of enquiry over time. This unfolding internal reflection and external sensitivity provides acute insight into the demands Shah made – simultaneously of herself and of her interlocutors – as the enquiring anthropologist. Thus as she queries Gyanji, the senior Maoist leader who she had met in earlier fieldwork and who arranged the meeting from which the night march would begin, she asks herself if she would have the commitment to leave her family behind to join the *guerrilla* (72). It's a question that becomes the more acute as we learn that back in the 70s and 80s, Gyanji chose to break with his middle-class family from a dominant caste and, at great personal cost, committed himself to the guerrilla struggle. His was the pattern for most of the leaders who sustained the campaign through the years, one that distinguished them from many of the younger Adivasi participants who, as we shall see, would move quite flexibly in and out of participation as a way of dealing with the strictures of village and family life. Thus Shah's form of enquiry through the dialectic of conversation reveals how insights work both ways as the account unfolds: her own self-perception and her understanding of her companions.

After extensive long-term ethnography in Adivasi communities, Shah uses classical participant observation in the period covered by the book to show how different kinds of people come into the movement, sustain it, experience doubts, waver and so on. Thus we are introduced to vividly-drawn people whose experiences serve as links to the more 'theoretical' issues the book raises. So the trek itself keeps the reader's attention while Shah combines her over four years' of work as an anthropologist in the area with her extensive reading on the debates around rural insurgency and revolution – from Guevara to Guzman, as it were. To do so, she divides the book into seven parts so that as the march unfolds, she reflects on a number of themes. These include the space of resistance and organisational issues; the role personal sacrifice plays for key figures, and the question of violence; the part played by the differing egalitarian ideals among the local people and the guerrillas; the particular character of the Indian state and capital; reflections on the intertwining (or not) of gender, generation, class, and caste; and finally a discussion of the possible usefulness of guerrilla struggle as one possible expression of subaltern agency.

It is not difficult to see then that *Nightmarch* is a great deal more than what its subtitle suggests, but space makes it impossible to assess the many themes it covers. Instead I will reflect on a theme that fascinates Shah throughout the book, but that she takes up explicitly near its end: the longevity of [this] guerrilla struggle and what its survival for so long (together with changing global fields of force) has done to change the conditions for achieving subaltern hegemony.

One of the insights we are afforded by Shah's proximity to participants in the struggle is the key role of intimacy in personal relations; obviously *among* the guerrillas themselves but crucially, too, between them and those around them, something that changes as the conditions of struggle come under greater pressure. When in the early period of guerrilla activity they had brought in doctors from outside the region, provided schools and established courts 'delivering justice fast and at no cost' (141), the result was both the emergence of a 'parallel state' but also a feeling of intimacy between the local Adivasis and the guerrilla outsiders. This was partly the

²There is no English equivalent of the Spanish word *guerrilla* which does not refer to the fighter but to the form of struggle itself.

result of physical proximity and the fact that, as one informant put it, ‘the Naxalites had worked much harder in serving them than the state had’ (133). But in Shah’s view, it was also and decisively because the Naxalites worked among Adivasis who themselves already shared many of their egalitarian values. So for people like Kohli, the young guerrilla who was made responsible for Shah’s safety, ‘the Naxalites represented a continuity rather than a stark rupture from the life they lived ...’ (138).

This synergy takes on a processual dimension given the practice of many Adivasis to migrate, often to brick kilns on the outskirts of India’s mushrooming cities, to supplement livelihoods made insufficient by state and capitalist marginalisation. There the harsh conditions they encounter provide stark evidence of capitalist exploitation (Shah et al. 2017), yet movements of this kind act to offset some of the strictures of family life at home. This degree of manoeuvrability, albeit minimal, which Wolf (1969, 291) ascribed to one element of the peasantry who were likely to be attracted to revolution, dovetails here with the ease with which some of the younger people shifted in and out of the *guerrilla*.

The fuzzy line between the ‘civilian’ population and the engaged fighters is what makes for the effectiveness of guerrilla warfare, and yet simultaneously incurs the unfocused violence meted out against it by its enemies. But it is Shah’s long-term familiarity with local people, together with her immediate experience over the days of the night march, that give insight into the processual way in which embeddedness occurs: the crucial element of *movement* within the everyday life of livelihood on the one hand and participating on and off in the guerrilla struggle on the other. ‘While the Indian government keenly represented the guerrillas as terrorising and coercing Adivasis in the movement, Adivasi youth moved freely in and out of the guerrilla armies, almost like they were visiting an uncle or an aunt’ (139). As a result, contrary to much of the discourse driving human rights commissions, which casts the local populations among whom insurgents carry on their battles as passive victims drawn reluctantly into the struggle, here (as often elsewhere) local people’s agency played a major part in the early success and sustainability of the guerrilla campaign.

As with the case of Mao’s Long March and more recently the Zapatistas, guerrillas’ sensitivity to local conditions despite their often distinct regional, caste, or class background are crucial. But the ability and resources to respond constructively to them can only be sustained by the guerrillas’ actual and demonstrable ability to master the fields of force within their zone of operations. This means effective offenses against the enemy over merely sustainable tactics of defence. So in the latter part of the book, as we get to know another of the archetypal people Shah so vividly presents – Vikas, whose leadership of the march becomes less and less consultative and with whom Shah had always felt discomfort – we are introduced to precisely these kinds of tensions. Through this case she notes the need for individual guerrillas to ‘earn’ (money), despite their maoist strictures, perhaps at first rather discretely, but over time increasingly openly. They do this through the manipulation of their close relations with large corporations operating in the area (receiving payments for non-interference, the classic protection racket), the illicit sale of forest products, and involvement in the black economy that so frequently clusters around infrastructural ‘development’ projects (165f).

It is at this point that the inevitable contradictions between ‘earning’ and ‘intimacy’ are revealed: the way earning for somebody like Vikas requires intimacy (with a contractor, a politician, a state official) and thereby corrupts it; not just that relationship, there in that moment, but more generally. It’s not conduct that can occur simply at the edges of the guerrilla sphere; it seeps back unevenly into the body of the movement. Not unlike a process Hobsbawm noted for the twilight of a social bandit’s career (1969), individual attempts to sustain the struggle against the beast by living off the beast result in increasingly compromised loyalties and the fatal role of informers.

So then the series of questions I raised at the outset as to how to evaluate guerrilla struggle would seem to require an answer that doesn't simply ask a static question about the conditions of possibility. Rather, such questions need to take into account the changes that arise as the struggle seeks to sustain itself through time. Is it even the same struggle? As Shah notes when reflecting on violence early in the book, the guerrillas risk reproducing the very system they want to destroy. The project to construct and spread autonomous systems of social reproduction that requires the military discipline peculiar to guerrilla struggle gets reversed: the military tactics required for survival overwhelm the social project. As she draws together a series of contradictions faced by sustained struggles such as this, Shah notes, 'The danger is that mastering the art and discipline of guns becomes the focus of the struggle, overriding and thus destroying the move to mobilise people towards new ideals and new communities' (258). An attainable utopia is replaced by a nostalgic memory, and the combination of the two is frequently worked out in accusations of doctrinal betrayals in the past that explain the inaccessibility of the proposed future. The practical steps to construct collective resistance and to bring forms of egalitarian social relations into reality become, over time, a kind of fantasy, one that no longer nurtures collective struggle but remains only to sustain the dignity of those who are persecuted, imprisoned, and die in its cause.


But while there is a sadness that envelopes the author on her return to London, and as persecutions in India become more widespread, not to mention the entire trajectory of the country's nightmarish 'miracle', she makes a convincing case for what we might call the domino theory of guerrilla struggle. She describes this as

a movement fighting against the character of Indian democracy [that] has expanded its reach amongst people who had previously been left on the margins of the state [and] *alienated from it* ... Naxalites have nurtured Dalits and Adivasis who would ultimately seek not the withering away of the state ... but would want a greater share of the state, *as part of it*. (259, italics added)

Such a conclusion could apply to cases of radical political interventions in other places today and at other times. Yet we may assess the successes and failures of cases like India's revolutionary guerrillas in their own terms but, as Shah so convincingly argues, their justification does not lie there alone; they are part of a much longer and broader array of struggles. By making us care about this often-neglected struggle through so vividly recounting the challenges it faces, Shah invites us to engage constructively with that ongoing struggle.

References

- Hall, Stuart. 2019. *Essential Essays Volume Two: Identity and Diaspora*. Edited by David Morley. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Hobsbawm, Eric. 1969. *Bandits*. New York: Delacorte Press.
- Shah, Alpa, Jens Lerche, Richard Axelby, Dalel Benbabaali, Brendan Donegan, Jayaseelan Raj, and Vikramaditya Thakur 2017. *Ground Down by Growth: Tribe, Caste, Class and Inequality in 21st Century India*. London: Pluto.
- Wolf, Eric. 1969. *Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century*. New York: Harper & Row.

Gavin Smith
 University of Toronto, Toronto, Canada
 National University of Ireland, Maynooth, Ireland
 gavin.gav@gmail.com

© 2019 Gavin Smith
<https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2019.1637044>

