



Shah, A. (2018), *Nightmarch: Among India's Revolutionary Guerrillas* (London: Hurst Publishers). ISBN: 978-1-849-04990-0.

In *Nightmarch: Among India's Revolutionary Guerrillas*, Alpa Shah breaks free from the confines of conventional anthropological writing to provide an engrossing account of life inside the long-standing Maoist insurgency against the Indian state, the so-called Naxalite rebellion. Shah's latest book is a beautifully crafted and highly engaging narrative that draws the reader into the secretive world of one of today's forgotten revolutions without ever running the risk of romanticising it in the process.

Based on eighteen months of participant observation among Adivasi communities in the rural hinterland of Jharkhand, where Naxalite mobilisation has proved most successful, Shah structures her account around a nocturnal 250-kilometre trek in which she participated disguised as a male combatant. Her ethnographically rich and vivid rendering of this adventure drives her in-depth exploration of various facets of the Naxalite revolutionary experience. Shah not only examines its historical origin in a small 1960s uprising in the West Bengal village of Naxalbari, which would from that point give the movement its name, but also retraces how it has gradually come to articulate the resistance of those people who find themselves outside India's uncompromising caste system, such as the 'untouchable' Dalits or the Adivasis, who as forest-dwelling semi-nomadic groups occupied very much the 'savage slot' in Indian society.

It is thanks to the author's nuanced and detailed storytelling that the quixotic struggle of her interlocutors at no point comes across as a Cold War anachronism, as an exercise in ideological futility, so to say, vis-à-vis the behemoth that is the Indian state and its booming economy. By giving voice to a variety of young people who joined the movement for very different reasons, ranging from the abstract and ideological to the very personal, parochial and opportunistic, Shah provides a useful corrective to monolithic approaches to revolutionary subjectivity that does not shy away from pointing out the contradictions of the movement. Throughout the book, the reader encounters a perplexing range of revolutionary experiences, best exemplified maybe by the juxtaposition of the biographies of Gyanji, an upper-class intellectual who recites Shelley and Shaw and decided to join the struggle at





the age of twenty-four, and Kohli, a sixteen-year-old Adivasi youth who joined after a fight with his father over a glass of spilt milk. As different as these revolutionary trajectories may seem, Shah argues convincingly that her Naxalite interlocutors' political engagement is motivated by the shared conviction that their political action can bring about a more egalitarian social order.

Rather than focusing solely on the normative discursive dimension of revolutionary politics, Shah explores in detail how these revolutionary demands for a more egalitarian order are enacted and practiced in the everyday life of the Adivasi communities that form the Naxalite heartlands. In acknowledging the extent to which this Maoist-inspired revolutionary movement has in fact been shaped by the agency of Adivasi people and the profoundly egalitarian ethos that governs Adivasi social life, Shah provides an insightful explanation for the astonishing longevity of the Naxalite rebellion. It is only because the movement is sustained by a very real sense of intimacy and strong interpersonal relationships among the insurgents that it has managed to withstand both the military might of the Indian state and the temptations that wider society offers young people in comparison to the relative austerity of the insurgent lifestyle. Both problematic and productive for the movement at once, many young insurgents find in the Naxalite community a family away from the family, which illustrates the extent to which considerations that cannot directly be traced back to Maoist ideology constitute one of the movement's significant pull factors.

All this is of course not to say that Maoism as a political ideology privileging the peasantry as agent of revolutionary change is not in itself uniquely positioned to articulate emancipatory demands in the context of rural Indian populations who are largely excluded from the benefits of economic transformation. Indeed, as Shah illustrates by drawing an interesting analogy between the anthropological method of participant observation and the immersive, participatory approach taken by Naxalite ideologues, Indian Maoism is marked by a genuine effort to understand and ameliorate local people's concrete problems. As Shah notes in an autobiographical aside, this genuine effort at participation stands in marked contrast to the practices dominant in international development where professionals often pay lip service to the idea of participation but rarely engage it in meaningful ways—a criticism the author convincingly extends to the state's lacking effort to reach rural areas and serves to further explain the Naxalites' popularity.

While recognising instances of corruption and excessive violence, as well as the Naxalites' dogmatic, quasi-theological refusal to update their outdated analysis on the Indian economy, *Nightmarch* nevertheless succeeds in elucidating why the author's own political judgement of the Naxalite guerrillas has evolved over time, from seeing them as little more than 'protection racketeers' at the beginning of her research to regarding them today as a progressive force in Indian society whose willingness to take up the cause of disadvantaged groups has emboldened these people to demand inclusion into the democratic process on equal terms as the dominant classes and castes.

It is not without irony, as Shah concludes, that the decisive legacy of the Naxalite rebellion against the democratic Indian state, which brands the movement as terrorism plain and simple, might one day well be described in terms of its democratising impact on society, mobilising those to demand representation who traditionally did not have a voice or visibility in the political arena. Fittingly, the very fact that this story is now accessible to a wide range of readers who might not necessarily be familiar with the jargon-heavy diction of contemporary anthropological discourse is empowering in its own right.

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