

Review

Shah, Alpa. *Nightmarch: Among India's Revolutionary Guerrillas*
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These are the people who, wittingly or unwittingly, have become part of the making of history but whose lives no history is likely to record.¹

It is my hope that Alpa Shah's *Nightmarch: Among India's Revolutionary Guerrillas* is translated into many languages, thereby expanding its reach, especially among the "chattering middle-classes" in India, laying down the seeds for imaginative sympathies to understand the different complexities of the Naxalite movement.² This work of narrative non-fiction, which is divided into seven thematic parts which collectively consist of twenty chapters, chronicles Shah's "unexpected seven-night trek with a Naxalite guerrilla platoon, undertaken in 2010 alongside new intensive counterinsurgency operations," disguised as a male in the olive-green Naxalite uniform, in the forests of central India.³ Any 'summary' of the subject-matters of the book would not be able to accord integrity to the intricate nature of its engagements, and to

Shah's commitment to her work, academic discipline, and research relationships. So, I shall not attempt that, even in the introductory paragraph.

Naxalite movement: An achingly human 'story'
In terms of writing, narrative is the central project in *Nightmarch*. Shah's theoretical reflections organically intertwine into this narrative so that it is able to give us deftly illuminating details of the political, sociocultural contours of the everyday life in guerrilla armies and Adivasi communities in India. She also undertakes an in-depth study of the processes underlying the movement of many young Adivasis into the left-wing Naxalite groups – as the guerrilla armies become a "home away from home" for them,⁴ through a vivid portrayal of their motivations,

¹ Alpa Shah, *Nightmarch: Among India's Revolutionary Guerrillas* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 324.

² *Ibid.*, 124.

³ *Ibid.*, Preface, xviii

⁴ *Ibid.*, 135.

longings, and aspirations. The primary thematic undercurrents here include belongingness, love, friendships, escape from the domestic monotony and filial trivialities.

Sacrifices and convictions of many members of the Naxalite movement for a less unjust and unequal society are reflective of “a rare alternative vision of a commitment and sincerity to a way of life and a future ...”⁵ However, the movement, Shah shows, is also coated in the shades of middle-class upper-caste moralities and political dogmatism of its male leadership. This is captured with sensitivity in her unpacking of three processes which highlight some of the wrenching ambivalences of the movement. First, as a result of the gendered nature of the movement, it has failed to free itself from the clutches of patriarchy. Second, the disjunctures between the Naxalite assumptions of Adivasi women’s subordination and lived realities can hardly be conducive in a struggle to explore possibilities for reorganizing social relations. Three, through her conversations with a senior leader of the movement, the leadership’s lack of appreciation for the nuanced role of alcohol in the sociocultural lives of Adivasis in Jharkhand – the vibrant glimpses of which we keep getting throughout the book – also comes to the fore.

One of the most important takeaways from *Nightmarch* is the gradual unpeeling of the layers which reveal the modalities through which the movement has become a monster of its own aspirational ideals and desires. As Shah moves back and forth between her incisive commentaries, the backstories of characters, and the excruciating march, these modalities continue to demonstrate how the movement has ended up reproducing the same class-caste-and gender-inspired inequities against which it is trying to forge a battle. Modernity’s ‘philanthropic arm’ – modern development –

and the brutalities of State in India continue to alter the dynamics of the movement, interspersing it with ironies and contradictions. Another of the key modalities is the pernicious role of violence in the movement. In the wake of counter-insurgency operations and State repression, violence has presumed an aura of inevitability in the guerrilla military armoury. It is a grim reminder – and a call to attention – that, come what may, violence, once it appears like a structural necessity, creates its own pathways. Any sense of humanly control over it is merely a phantasm.

Identifying the echoes of remarkability

Nightmarch will resonate with me in the future for one particular reason, among other things. The intimate relationship of Shah’s honesty to her own self and her anthropological method has goaded me to plunge into uncharted territories (as an aspiring researcher) and interrogate the moral imperatives and ambiguities of being an anthropologist. Her intense ‘immersion’ in the ‘field’ and intrepid writing, characterised by a detailed prose with moments of refreshing sentimentalities, has guided me to substantivize the questions of reciprocity, ethico-political dilemmas, and reflexivity in the context of academic research. Therein also lies the seductive charm of the book.

This review would be incomplete without a mention of the concluding essays of the book. While *Fieldnotes on Making new Futures* poignantly summarizes the principal ideas and arguments of the book, *A Bibliographic essay on the Naxalites* is a meticulous review of the contemporary work related to the Naxalite movement. It includes works coming from the worlds of academia, fiction, and non-fiction, tying them through commonalities and distinctions, in terms of themes, positionality of

⁵ *Ibid.*, 268.

authors, primary arguments, and narrative structures. These essays, coupled with the gently luminous writing, abundant with arresting characterisations, and easy structural accessibility of the book make me want to wish that there are more ‘academic’ texts of this nature, especially from scholars who have spent a significant amount of time in a particular ‘location,’ working on interrelated themes.

As a parting word, I would like to briefly allude to the title of the book, ‘Nightmarch,’

which lends itself to multiple interpretations, the literal one notwithstanding. I read it as a march into an abyss, engulfed by the feeling of being trapped in a spatiotemporal labyrinth with little to no hope of any meaningful return. This, then, is the contemporary India, another harsh and unsympathetic setting of so-called modernity, where the muddled meanings of democracy, social transformation, and politics continue to produce inequities in its most stark forms.