

Book Review

A Song of the Guerrillas: Reading Alpa Shah's Field Diary

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Shah, Alpa. 2018. *Nightmarch: A Journey into India's Naxal Heartlands*. Noida: Harper Collins Publishers India £ 16.99, pp. 330.

The Maoists have long been circumscribed in statist political discourse as the single biggest internal security threat in India. The erstwhile Prime Minister Manmohan Singh had labelled the revolutionary insurgents marching through the forests of central and eastern India as such, way back in 2006 – and urged for a full-blown state mission to eliminate the ‘threat’. A little over a decade since, the state’s fear of the Maoists is no longer spectrally confined to the forested plains of *adivasi* settlement. It has now found its way, through newsroom drama and scripted public-media angst, into urban-metropolitan households as well as the great Indian apolitical middle-class imagination. Nursed by a most ‘natural’ loathing against this enemy of the state, the charmed insiders to India’s ‘development story’ have seen the Maoist threat rise up from the subtropical wilderness and slither into airconditioned activist-dens as “urban Naxals”. In their enchantingly new avatar, the ‘overground’ Maoists – living otherwise-respectable colony-lives – have been imagined to hatch assassination plots against a Prime Minister who is himself implicated in genocidal violence against thousands in Gujarat. They have thus been stripped off their urban foliage of respect and hurled into prison-houses on trumped-up charges, without as much as a proper trial. On the face of it, Alpa Shah’s *Nightmarch* would strike the ruling Hindu right-wing political establishment in India as the confessions of a ‘non-resident’ urban Naxal. And, it might well be used as the touchstone for discerning a ‘seditious’ heart and tracing its mysterious throbs as far away as in British territory. One can only ruefully begin reviewing Shah’s fascinating work by being grateful about her foreign citizenship. If she were here, she might have been

languishing in jail today with Shoma Sen and Arun Ferreira and Varavara Rao (all of whom she mentions in her bibliographic essay).

Nightmarch: A Journey into India's Naxal Heartlands begins by inviting its reader into intrigued musings around its exact genre. Though declaredly an ethnographic account of the Naxalite guerrillas and their *adivasi* patron-supporters living in the hills and forests of Jharkhand, Alpa Shah weaves an acute poignancy into the story that emerges. The felicity of her narrative – and its force of realism – not only convinces one of her “deep immersion [...] into the lives of people who are initially strangers” (p. xix), but also carries a breath-taking urgency that may only rightfully belong to the master storyteller. She recounts the previous contexts and the long periods of her acquaintance with her anthropological field, from the time of her doctoral research (between 1999 and 2002) to the mounting counterinsurgency operations conducted by the Indian state from 2008 to 2010. It is at the peak of this military offensive that Shah finds her desire to decipher the truths about *adivasi* enlistment in revolutionary-communist militias crossing paths with the everyday routines of a Naxalite guerrilla. What results of this aleatory encounter – assumedly not intrinsic to the ethnographer’s ‘intentions’ – is a seven-night journey through the rugged margins of the Indian heartland and in secret intimacy with ‘dreaded terrorists’ waging a war against the state. What was so accidental to Shah’s project is yet manoeuvred with such deftness of skill and understanding of purpose that *Nightmarch* cannot but be rated as one of the most insightful glimpses into the contemporary conditions of Maoist mobilisation. Perhaps it is the unplanned nature of Shah’s encounter that grants it both a degree of measured perceptiveness as well as a general distance from romantic thrill. The hard thud of criticality echoes through the author’s interrogation of revolutionary political idealism, its compromises with the state-capital nexus and their regular cultural-emotional traffic with *adivasi* destinies.

Not surprisingly, the narrative suction in Shah’s account evokes parallels with Arundhati Roy’s famed reportage from the ‘deadly’ entrails of Bastar in *Walking with the Comrades* (2011). But, there is something that distinguishes the two – and makes the consummate chronicler in Shah stand out, with her trained navigation of the ‘field’ as more than a legible/intelligible text. While Roy’s visit was framed within the context of an ‘invited’ ground-report and was therefore laced with a desire to narrate the ‘reality’ of a movement that was criminally misrepresented by the guardian-patrons of public opinion, there is no such privileged claim in Shah’s discourse. Yet, there is deep sympathy for the protagonists of an underground revolution as much as for the cultural resilience of the most dispossessed of India’s tribal populations. And, it is this deliberate shunning of the need for moral pronouncement that makes some of Shah’s characters stand out in bold relief – almost as from an immortal classic of existential significance. For example, figures like Prashant, Gyanji, Kohli, Vikas, Somwari and Seema represent strands of moral ambiguity incipient in every actor of a history long sought to be told and untold in equally damning accents.

Gyanji abstracts both the selflessness and the hubris of an upper-caste English-educated Maoist leadership, whereas Kohli distils the hope for a reformed and transformative future. The latter's abashed gallantry and near-filial concern for the 'didi' in the author is fodder for the Maoist's rethinking of the gender question, or it might end up being conveniently swallowed by the patriarchal protectionism of a world outside and yet too close.

However, the two living portraits that unforgettably resonate through the pages of *Nightmarch* are of Somwari and Vikas. Somwari, an Oraon tribeswoman, had sheltered the author in her house at Lalgaon. She would feed the Maoist boys platefuls of rice, because they needed to remain strong through their forest ordeals. She is critical of neighbours who mimed Hindu marriage rituals and disapproves of their desire for outward mobility; she procured her daily supplies by making *mahua* wine and would perhaps have not joined a Hindu spiritual sect if a daughter-like Binita had not trampled her *mahua* pots to dust as part of a Naxalite anti-alcohol campaign. At the other extreme of this story of Maoist indoctrination stands Vikas, who Gyanji refers to as "Frankenstein's monster". Joining the guerrilla squad as an *adivasi* boy, he went on to lead a platoon and dream of private aggrandisement through contracts with mining corporations. The "Vikases of the world", as Shah says, represented a certain threat of the *adivasi* worldview crumbling in its collisions with the guerrillas and eventually producing the stealthy cunning of police informers. These are characters who will live on – beyond and outside of Shah's narrative canvas – as necessary reminders of the inner contradiction that belies a chronicle of gross caste and gender inequalities. They become the national allegory of a shining India, gaping its maws open unto the greed of multinational corporations and turning away from the fatal hunger of an overwhelming majority.

In understanding how forms of caste-indignity and *adivasi* social experience are enfolded into the histories of armed insurrection, Shah contests the popular explanatory tropes of a 'sandwich theory' (p. 141) and an indigenous 'grievance theory' (p. 142). It has been largely argued by social and political scientists as much as by human rights activists that the poor *adivasis* are inescapably sandwiched between the repressive barbs of the Indian state on the one hand and the Naxalite forces on the other. Still others have sought to make sense of the tribal communities' engagement in the armed violence as provoked by their grievances against a developmentalist state as well as the need for indigenous self-assertion. Shah's probe into the vector of the quotidian lays out something far more organic about the relationship between the *adivasis* and the Naxalites. In most cases, it musters neither a spectacular rite of passage nor an ideological programme. A young boy joins the Naxalite ranks while fleeing a father's beating, while girls have left their families for the dream of marrying guerrilla soldiers they find themselves in love with. The symbiotic communities of trust and mutuality are thereafter forged in the conscious egalitarianism of everyday attitudes and exchanges. An economy of interdependence is gradually forced by the contingencies of survival and the resulting networks of kinship.

Moving in and out of the armed squads – often for periods of migrant labour in faraway brick kilns – “the Adivasis come to treat the guerrilla armies as a home away from home” (p. 135).

In one of the most critically penetrative chapters in the text, Alpa Shah unravels the ironies of funding the Naxalite movement and the collateral costs of sustaining a presumed ‘terrorist organisation’. Though driven by a potent critique of crony capitalism and constantly renewing its pledge to defeating the might of the market, the Naxalites required substantial amounts of money to legally defend arrested comrades, conduct mass mobilisation programmes, purchase advanced weapons capable of fighting the scourge of a military state, train inductees in the art of guerrilla combat and organise regular health camps or campaigns. Inevitably, they had to fall back on the shadowy border-zone of illegal transactions with either the state or big capital. The author terms these as “protection rackets” (p. 170), aimed at ensuring reciprocal immunity for both the underground militias and their potential oppressors on conditions of profitable exchange. Tragically, this only allowed the tentacles of capitalist exploitation to dig deeper into the communitarian value-systems of *adivasi* living. Through contracts struck with mining companies, local black markets for village produce and agents of state-led development schemes, the Naxalites not only marked out safe ‘havens’ for the state and capital but also brought an entirely distinctive social mythology (of the tribals) close to the threat of a permanent contamination. *Adivasi* boys – the likes of Vikas and Birsa – are enticingly thrown into the amoral structures of a choice between the lure of private accumulation and the opportunistic penance of becoming police informers. They are either drawn wayward into dreams of material mobility and consequently, the value-systems of middle-class urbanism – or they are forced into a life of traitorous expiation. As a result, the community expunges them and watches with dismay as more and more such young men turn foreign to its very being. We, the readers, are thus made witnesses to an *adivasi* Vikas’ induction into the structural casteism and muscular patriarchy of the Indian mainland.

It is at this point that *Nightmarch* affords an unsparing critique of the Naxalites’ relationship with the question of gender – both organisationally and ideologically. With women seldom making it to the top leadership and with an effective segregation of female recruits within the Nari Mukti Sangh (Women’s Liberation Wing), the Maoist struggle came to be largely experienced as bound into a careful male homosociality. The girls in olive green gear would occasionally surprise with their working of the rifles or even rise to becoming a Deputy Platoon Commander, but the average period of their stay with the ‘*jungle sarkar*’ would hardly ever exceed a year. They would settle into marital routines or go off to work in some brick factory, without the insurrectionary space really ‘liberating’ them into any egalitarian sense of dignity or purpose. Quite on the contrary, women were structurally excluded from the time-space coincidences of organisational decision-making and often feared as potential objects of romantic-sexual distraction for the ascetic revolutionaries. Love affairs, which were all too

common within the guerrilla squads, were still viewed with suspicion – and childbearing was decisively shunned as weakening the movement through prospective defections. It is true that senior leaders like Gyanji had not only torn themselves off from their wives (however incompletely!), but were also trained into treating women in the squads with rare dignity and an ethical conscience. Yet, there remained an indelible trace of moral protectionism in their ideological commitment to the women’s issue. Coming from high-caste middle-class backgrounds, their cognitive inheritance of patriarchy did not sit well with the social performance of gender-roles within *adivasi* communities. Little were the Maoists interested in knowing first-hand these forms of sociality and sexual agency that were already existent among the women they lived and worked in the midst of. In thus fighting against the ghosts of ‘*adivasi* patriarchy’ without caring to discern its differences from mainlander sensibilities, the Maoists – Shah emphatically rues – destroyed alternative traditions and possibilities of imagining gender-justice. The missed encounter between a Maoist Seema and an Oraon Somwari lingers on as the definitive metaphor of how the middle-class ideological reins over a revolutionary leadership fail to take on the feisty outcaste.

Nightmarch merits the undeniable force of conviction when it observes: “indeed, when one travels across the Indian countryside and witnesses the violence of systematic neglect and oppression that has been wrought on India’s low castes and tribes, it is often hard not to feel that the only way to change things is for them to take up arms to make their demands.” (pp. 192-193) But at the same time, there is the disenchantment of knowledge that comes from staying for years among this detritus of the Indian social order. It warns that counterviolence – because of its relative ease over the slow labours of transformative social change – might eventually move from being a means to the end of a movement. And that is where a ‘nightmarch’, despite the glimpses it affords into a subterranean example of sublime hope, must end in no cathartic return to the humdrum. In faraway London, the fortunes of a Maoist dream folded into *adivasi* futures haunt the author with news of Gyanji’s arrest, Somwari’s spiritual conversion, Vikas’ death sentence in a ‘people’s court’ and Kohli’s mysterious disappearance. Shah’s ethnography must simply open unto this aesthetic of disappearance – as neither the end nor a foretelling of the Maoist adventure, as neither moral commentary nor prophetic conjuring.

There is only one point where Shah’s narrative severs this mooring in brutal realism – and that resonates with a rather uncharacteristic laxity of the imagination. While describing Gyanji’s roots and career, the text exotically – and quite tediously – weaves in an analogy between the revolutionary communist and the *yogic* renouncer of religious lore. For Shah, the motif of sacrifice – that animates either’s disposition towards the world – is but an ethical openness to equality as an ‘idea’. For an ethnographic account, this seems to risk a charge of unnecessary romanticism – something that the participant-observer is always alive to the tendency of. But then, for every such moment of imaginative detraction, there is soon the bitter sarcasm of truth that follows: “As the deadliest

animal on earth, the mosquito was in fact India's greatest internal threat, yet I had never seen signs of a nationwide government programme to eliminate malaria." (p. 162) We are left wondering why the Indian state's concern for the security of its people does not extend as far as the question of public health. Is it its own people instead that the state must defend (and, divide) us from?

Placing an eyewitness testimony of the Maoist guerrillas against the history of radical communist politics in the world, *Nightmarch* ends with a commendable critical capsule of the entire oeuvre of work that has been produced about the Indian Naxalite movement. Calling it a "bibliographic essay", Shah performs a skillful outline of Naxalite literature in nearly all genres – from the insider's memoir to journalistic reportage and scholarly analysis and fiction. *Nightmarch* works out a near-alchemy of all these forms, and for as disturbing as its material might be Alpa Shah does not relent till all is said and accurately so.