

REVIEWS

Alpa Shah, *Nightmarch: Among India's Revolutionary Guerrillas*
Hurst & Company: London 2018, £20, hardback
320 pp, 978 1 84904 990 0

KHEYA BAG

RED FLAGS IN THE FOREST

In 2010, at the height of the Congress government's counterinsurgency operation against India's Maoists, Alpa Shah set off on a seven-night trek with a Naxalite guerrilla platoon, disguised as one of the men. Under cover of darkness, they traversed 250 kilometres from the uplands of Bihar to the forests of Jharkhand, picking their way through rocky gorges, fording rivers, crossing enemy zones under the starlit sky. Building on years of ethnographic fieldwork in Jharkhand's tribal villages, Shah's *Nightmarch* combines an account of that perilous journey with reflections on the puzzle of Indian Maoism: how has the Naxalite struggle managed to persist and renew itself, despite being vastly outnumbered by the security forces mobilized against it? And how, relatedly, did the Naxalites manage to implant themselves among the Adivasi of the forests, indigenous people famously wary of outsiders? As Shah trains herself to follow in the footsteps of the young Adivasi boy in front of her, the endless march becomes a metaphor for the endurance of one of the world's longest armed struggles, while Maoism itself seems a symptom of Indian society.

Nightmarch is a work of literary non-fiction, vividly evocative, weaving descriptions of the journey with five character-portraits, to some extent archetypes, that help to illuminate Shah's thoughtful and nuanced discussion of the uprising's social and cultural background. Somwari, the independent-minded Adivasi woman whose mud home Shah shares, is a touchstone. Gyanji, a 'professional revolutionary' with sad eyes and soft feet,

is the moral and intellectual leader of the Maoist group she's with, whom Shah engages in ceaseless critical debate. Prashant, a young guerrilla to whom she feels particularly drawn, had as a 10-year-old run away from his cow-herding family to join a Maoist cultural troupe, learning to read and write with them. When Shah arrived ill at her initial rendezvous with the guerrillas, Prashant was ready with a salt-and-sugar solution to rehydrate her, one of many instances of the Maoists' small kindnesses to her. In sharp contrast, the swaggering Vikas is apparently getting rich from the 'taxes' the guerrillas extract from companies operating in the area. Gentle Kohli, aged 16, is the son of a teashop owner and joined the Maoists after a tiff with his parents; part of the narrative—and ethical—tension of *Nightmarch* lies in the uncertainty as to whose path Kohli will follow: that of Vikas, or that of Prashant?

Underlying Shah's account of the Maoists is her prior study of Adivasi communities. Kenyan-born and British-educated, she was drawn into working on poverty programmes and international aid after a degree from Cambridge. She first arrived in the region in 1999, staying in an Adivasi village of a hundred mud huts, to engage in a Malinowski-style participant-observer study of how aid money was siphoned off by middlemen before it reached the poor—fieldwork for her doctorate at the LSE, where she currently teaches. Shah learned two of the local Adivasi languages and, as a diasporic Indian, could more or less embed herself as a local. That research informed her first book, *In the Shadows of the State* (2010), on the class interests and politics of indigenous rights and development. Naxalites were beginning to make connections in the area, not through poor labourers, but by extorting protection money from local contractors vying for state projects. From this, she concluded that the Maoists were just another racket.

But Shah's questions grew as the Congress government ramped up the repression—in 2006, Manmohan Singh declared the Maoists a terrorist threat that was deterring international investment in the resource-rich forest zones, and sent 100,000 troops, backed by helicopters and special forces, for their elimination—yet the Naxalite presence amongst Adivasi communities continued to grow. Why were the villagers joining the Maoists? Her damascene *Nightmarch* originated in a further round of fieldwork in Jharkhand, where she lived for eighteen months between 2008 and 2010 in a region she calls Lalgaoon that turned out to be the Maoists' 'Red Capital'. A thickly forested plateau composed of Deccan lava, with a population of 40,000 Adivasis dispersed in some thirty villages, Lalgaoon was bounded by broad rivers to the north and south, and dissected by many smaller streams and rivulets; during monsoons, it was completely cut off from the plains. Socially as well as geographically, this was ideal guerrilla territory. The Adivasi inhabitants of the forests mainly lived by subsistence farming; some were still hunter-gatherers.

Nightmarch sketches the historical contours of the region. The British Raj had imported Hindu and Muslim traders from the plains, to manage extraction from the forests (teak, tigerskins, ebony), leaving behind a legacy of internal settler-colonial relations. The Adivasis had risen in protest against their exactions; the famous Santhal Rising of 1855 was brutally crushed. Backed by missionaries, they eventually won some legal protection for their lands from the Raj, which was then enshrined in the Fifth and Sixth Schedules of the 1949 Constitution of India. Scheduled land is owned collectively, requiring the agreement of 80 per cent of local people in a sale, and cannot be transferred to non-Adivasis. But the region is rich in mineral resources—coal, iron ore, bauxite, copper, manganese—and these legal protections were frequently circumvented by global mining companies, with state support. Claiming to reduce poverty through development, they have often displaced the original inhabitants and brought in migrant labour from other states.

In Shah's account, the Adivasis reacted by moving deeper into the forest, preserving their way of life. To some extent she is following in the footsteps of anthropologists like Pierre Clastres, in the Amazon, and James C. Scott, in Southeast Asia's uplands, in discerning a greater degree of egalitarianism and collectivity among the 'jungle people' than can be found on India's densely populated and caste-divided plains: 'The closer you got to the forests, the less the influence of interdependency and hierarchy between groups that mark caste society in the plains, and the greater the autonomy people had over their own lives.' The Adivasi communities, who had fought to keep higher-caste outsiders at bay, could survive off the land. This did not mean autarchy: capitalist development had long been making inroads; Adivasis would trek to the brick kilns as migrant labour, or gather *kendu* leaves from the forest for hand-rolled cigarettes and sell them to traders. But Shah provides many instances of co-operative, egalitarian relations. Collective labour—collaborating to build a home or harvest a crop—was part of the Adivasi way of life, rewarded with communal celebrations: rice and spinach broth, home-brewed rice beer, drums and dancing. Shah stresses that egalitarianism extended to gender relations: men took part in washing clothes and preparing meals; women drank and danced. On the day of the weekly market, 'it was the women who usually went to sell their household wares, who enjoyed rice beer at the *haat* with their male and female friends, and who came home rather merry to husbands who had stayed back and cooked.' Unlike the marital customs of the plains, women like Shah's friend Somwari chose their husbands, and took the initiative in changing partners if things did not work out.

How did the Naxalites penetrate these communities? Shah's study signals different modalities of power, with consent and corruption, of various sorts, generally predominating over coercion. According to Kohli's father,

the teashop owner, it was 'the little things': an attitude of respect towards local people, removing their shoes before they entered people's homes, sitting on the floor as the villagers did, paying attention. There were other factors: the Maoist cultural troupes would go round the villages with songs, drums and speeches, attracting large audiences among the youth. With money gleaned from businessmen and contractors, they ran free health centres, attended by hundreds from the surrounding districts, organized vast football tournaments and undertook sustained cultural projects, such as creating a written script for the indigenous Gondi language. The guerrilla squads targeted local 'oppressors', blowing up a Forestry Service lodge and raising remuneration rates for *kendu* leaves and other forest products. Rather than marauding, their travelling platoons would request just one plate of rice from each household in the village. At the same time, the Maoist 'mass fronts' organized political rallies and road blocks, calling for the NREGA social-welfare system to be extended, protesting against displacements, burning Congress ministers in effigy. According to the father of one guerrilla, few of the villagers knew of the ministers' existence before the Maoists' arrival: 'The Naxalites educated us on what was due to us from the state; in fact, on what the state was supposed to be.'

Though its political roots can be traced to the splits in the Indian Communist Party at the time of the 1962 Sino-Indian war, Indian Maoism officially burst onto the stage with the 1967 peasant uprising in the West Bengal village of Naxalbari, hailed by Radio Peking as a peal of spring thunder over India. In the 1970s, radicalized 'Naxalite' students, often from upper-caste families, went to the villages to help fight landlord oppression. By the 1980s, the struggle had spread to the 'burning plains' of Bihar, as Maoist cadres sought to mobilize landless Dalit labourers. Landlord retaliation was savage—the order was to 'cut them down by six inches', in spectacular decapitations. Seeking better geographical terrain for guerrilla warfare, the Naxalites began to retreat into Adivasi country: the hills and forests of central and eastern India—Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh and the surrounding states. In 2004, three Maoist groups fused into the CPI (Maoist). Shah gives a fascinating description of the hierarchical committee structures brought into being by 'the Party' across this wild terrain: politburo, central committee, state-level, regional, zonal and area bodies. *Nightmarch* begins with her attendance at a five-yearly Maoist congress, hidden in the depths of Bihar: a festive tent city materializes on a hillside, with red flags flying and icons garlanded in marigolds. (It is from here that she will set out on the long trek back to Jharkhand.)

But the arrival of the Naxalites in the Adivasi regions also brought new tensions and contradictions. First, villagers often bore the brunt of counterinsurgency operations, though the anger these produced was also a powerful recruiting mechanism for the Maoists. Second, there was the

ambiguous nature of what Shah had earlier termed their ‘protection rackets’. Here she offers a fine-grained analysis of the appearance and reality of ‘corruption’: the ways in which public goods are channelled into private gain, but equally how private gain is redistributed. Banned as a terrorist group, and without a trade in drugs or foreign funding, the Naxalites had three main sources of income: large-scale corporations, like mining operations; the illicit economy of forest products; and the black economy around state-infrastructure development projects. The Maoists’ relationship with the mining companies is a case in point: not anti-development per se, they demand a ‘tax’ from the managers in return for not interfering with their operations. A major achievement of *Nightmarch* is that the macro-level of the Indian economy and polity remain in view. In a geography of uneven and combined development—deepened under neoliberal competition and the fragmentation of subnational provinces—iron mined in Chhattisgarh is piped as slurry to be pelletized in Andhra Pradesh, then forged into steel in Gujarat. Under Maoist protection, the pipeline itself remains intact.

To Gyanji, the intellectual, the comrades were merely collecting money that was in any case illicit, ‘already circulating through corruption rackets, or accumulated by exploiting the labour of the poor’. Yet the process imbricated young Adivasi recruits in the corrupt relations that the Maoists were sworn to overthrow, offering a peculiar form of social mobility. Young bucks like Vikas could be drawn to the lifestyle and aspirations of the contractors whose ‘taxes’ they collected: SUVs, smartphones, soft porn. Gyanji fretted to Shah about creating ‘Frankenstein’s monsters’. The next step for renegades was often to enter politics, the fastest way to accumulate power and status while also lining one’s pockets. Shah encounters a young Oraon man who plans to restart his life after a spell in prison as a Naxalite, by throwing in his lot with a local politician ‘in the hope that he could one day mobilize enough support to fight for a seat himself’. A further contradiction—one Shah does not point out—is that the territorial control vital for the Maoists’ revenue flows can also lead to ferocious sectarianism against other forces on the left.

Shah has trenchant criticisms to make of the Maoists’ dogmatic insistence that India is a ‘semi-feudal’ society, one of her points of difference with Gyanji. The upshot is that the Naxalites cannot analyse the capitalist relations into which the Adivasis are drawn, whether in the brick kilns of the Hooghly River or the parasitical ‘taxes’ exacted from the mining multinationals. It also means they treat Adivasi culture as backward, destined to be erased by historical development, rather than appreciating its egalitarian dimensions. *Nightmarch* is particularly good at probing the gender dimensions of Maoist doxa, in their clash with indigenous autonomy. As Shah notes, international representations have been quick to focus on ‘the allegedly empowering changes guerrilla war brought to women’s lives’. (With some amusement, she admits that the striking cover photograph of armed Adivasi women was

at the request of the Women's Liberation Front, who wanted to see themselves posing with the men's guns.) In 1967, the first bolt of 'spring thunder' in Naxalbari was an arrow shot by a tribal woman with a baby strapped to her back. Since then, many women have taken up arms after paramilitary attacks, when whole communities needed to band together. But on a day-to-day basis, traditional divisions of labour in the movement still prevail.

There is also a gendered element to the kinds of social mobility afforded by the Naxals in levying taxes, often accompanied by 'a new set of middle-class, upper-caste values around femininity and masculinity', which had little respect for the independence and autonomy of Adivasi women. Tensions in Lalgaon came to a head over the question of alcohol. Binita, a teenage Maoist, raised the slogan, 'Women come forward to strengthen the fight against patriarchy: Ban the brewing of alcohol', and set about publicly shaming brewers like Somwari by smashing their earthenware pots—the end of Somwari's sympathy with the movement. In her conclusion, Shah reveals the fates of the characters: Gyanji is in prison, facing torture; Prashant was killed in an ambush, walking the same path Shah had taken; Vikas became a mercenary, working with the security forces, only to be executed by the Maoists; Somwari had joined a Hindu sect. The village school in which Shah had taught was occupied by a huge state-security force.

Since 2007 there has been a torrent of English-language writing about India's Maoists, much of it discussed in Shah's thoughtful bibliography (on the early history, Sumanta Banerjee's *In the Wake of Naxalbari* [1980], published in the UK as *India's Simmering Revolution*, remains a classic). Shah distinguishes a number of genres: security studies; critical political analysis; reportage, often sympathetic; ethnographical research; novels; and Naxalite literature, above all the posthumous collections of work by the Maoist feminist Anuradha Ghandy and 'Azad', *nom de guerre* of Cherukuri Rajkumar. (Shah also notes the official 2008 Planning Commission report on the revival of Maoism, which set out the context of deprivation and exclusion in which the Adivasis live, and proposed reforms such as extending village devolution and democracy. But as Shah puts it, glossing Mao, 'development under the barrel of a gun' won out, led by Congress's then Home Minister P. Chidambaram, who had made his career as a corporate lawyer for mining companies.)

Among the political analyses, Shah singles out work by Anuradha Chenoy and Kemal Chenoy, Neera Chandhoke, Gautam Navlakha and Ajay Gudavarthy, much of it bitterly critical of the Indian state, and often part-published in India's indomitable *Economic & Political Weekly*. The outstanding narrative account is Nandini Sundar's *The Burning Forest* (2016), tracking the counterinsurgency in the Chhattisgarh district of Bastar. In 2010, as Operation Green Hunt intensified, the Maoists invited journalists and activists to their base in Bastar, Arundhati Roy among them. After her

ten-day visit, Roy published *Walking with the Comrades*, a powerfully poetic account that attracted broad international attention. More typical is the view taken by Nirmalangshu Mukherji in *The Maoists in India: Tribals Under Siege* (2012)—the Adivasis are ‘caught between two armies’, the Naxal guerrillas and the state security forces, as if they were comparable.

Within this notable literature, several factors set Shah’s book apart. Unlike other works of creative non-fiction or long-form journalism, *Nightmarch* delves into history, politics and psychology. The device of the trek dramatizes the conceptual questions at stake, which Shah turns over in her mind as she walks. Imagery and narrative tensions convey social processes, relationships and contradictions. Within the genre of sustained first-hand research, she investigates both the Adivasis and the Naxals, providing a complex, chiaroscuro reading of the multi-faceted relations between the two. Above all, *Nightmarch* is distinguished from the run of ethnographical research by its remarkable ethical-political dimension. It’s hard to imagine any of the great anthropologists invoked above engaging in passionate political debates with their subjects about the surrounding political economy or the autonomy of indigenous women. That Shah does so is above all because she treats the groups she is living with as equal social and political beings. She offers neither condemnation nor romanticization, but a considered analysis of the ‘experiences, visions and actions’ of the people she encounters, presenting not only what they say, but what they do. The result is a powerful synthesis, warm but never uncritical, a distillation of her own scholarship and the experiences of her subjects, that immerses the reader in a lifeworld.

Inevitably, the study of a particular setting will have its aporia. Filled with insight into the micro- and macro-level, *Nightmarch* for the most part bypasses the middle layer of Indian party politics. The Naxals’ relation to ethno-national liberation struggles in the Adivasi regions is left unclear. The Maoists who established their stronghold in Bastar had initially supported the Telangana statehood movement, calling for the region to be separated from the mega-state of Andhra Pradesh. Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand were likewise created as ‘tribal states’ in 2000 by the BJP-led government. They had co-opted a long-standing but fractured campaign for an autonomous Jharkhand during a vote surge in the area as a way of weakening regional adversaries in Bihar, for which they found common cause with the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM). For much of its existence, Jharkhand has been a ‘failed state’ with frequent rotation between the BJP, JMM and President’s rule. Founded in the early 1970s from various organizations agitating for rights to land and forest, including Maoist trade unionists in the collieries, the degeneration of the JMM is the stuff of crime thrillers. As Shah herself noted in her first book, Maoist expansion in her village relied on a network of individuals who had known each other from JMM campaigns. Once in power, the JMM were relatively sympathetic to the new wave

of Adivasi rebellion, but buckled under Congress pressure from the centre and a series of lurid scandals (murders, collusion, corruption). A BJP regime has stabilized in the last five years in a communalized socio-political landscape where different tribal groups across parties divvy up reserved seats. Meanwhile, 'as their world is torn apart', religious sects are making inroads into once isolated Adivasi communities, to bring these 'original Indians' into the fold of the Hindu mainstream—the fate of Somwari.

One factor that sets Indian Maoism apart from the other movements that have outlived the death of the prototype in China—the New People's Army in the Philippines, the EPL in Colombia, factions of the Nepalese Communist Party—is that India is one of the few countries where both communist families—Stalinist and Maoist—have been a significant political force. As Achin Vanaik observed in NLR 70, the character of the Indian left responded to the country's peculiar dualism: the macro-structures of bourgeois parliamentary democracy co-exist with extremely violent socio-political realities, especially in the countryside; at the same time, the inequalities of capitalist development only reinforce the enduring pre-capitalist hierarchies of the caste system. In this context, left-wing politics polarized between the Stalinists, committed till the end to liberal electoralism, and the Maoists, armed defenders of the poorest and most deprived. Their paths have been nowhere more at odds than in the state of West Bengal. The 1967 peasant rebellion of Naxalbari was a watershed: the CPM stood by as the state regime, of which they were coalition partners, crushed an uprising led by their own peasant front. Out of this betrayal, the CPI (Marxist-Leninist) was founded and pledged to a Maoist guerrilla strategy. In the end, it was a rural mass movement that ousted the CPM from power in West Bengal in 2011.

The state's arid western plateau is part of India's Tribal Belt, not far from where Shah's book is set, and was a flashpoint around the same time. The struggle to end agrarian poverty had been effectively ceded to the Maoists by the mainstream left. There in Lalgarh, Maoists shared platforms against government-led evictions and repression with the Trinamool Congress, and even ran one of their political prisoners as an independent candidate in the 2011 state election. TMC leader Mamata Banerjee, now Chief Minister of West Bengal, had supplied solidarity when she was in opposition, but within months of her entering office the main leader of the Maoist movement, Kishenji, had been killed. While granting some inducements, the state has also set up local vigilante groups and jailed more leaders. In these dark times, as Modi's government ratchets up talk of the 'Maoist terrorist threat', *Nightmarch* provides an important reminder of what is at stake.