BOOK REVIEW

New Light on the Naxalite Movement

John Harriss*

Shah, Alpa (2018), *Nightmarch: Among India's Revolutionary Guerillas*, Hurst and Company, London, 256 pages, Rs 1900.

In 2016, according to a report published by the State Department in the United States, the Maoists, whose insurgency has affected a large part of India (perhaps 40 per cent of the country's land area), were reckoned to be the third deadliest terrorist group in the world, after the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and the Taliban. India's Maoist guerillas have, however, a much longer history than has either ISIS or the Taliban, going back to the uprising that started in Naxalbari, West Bengal, more than fifty years ago, in 1967. What came to be known as the Naxalite movement was soon crushed by the Indian state, but thanks to the commitment of some of its leaders and their willingness to sacrifice their lives to the cause of bringing about a more humane world, the movement survived, albeit divided into different factions, before the most important of them came together in 2004 to form the Communist Party of India (Maoist). In this century, the Maoists have become sufficiently powerful to control significant pockets, at least in eastern India, in spite of the massive mobilisations of well-armed security forces against them.

How and why is it that these revolutionary guerilla fighters, whose struggle is to destroy the Indian state and establish a communist society, have been able to survive for so long and even to flourish in the heart of what is loudly proclaimed to be the world's largest democracy? This is the question that the anthropologist Alpa Shah sets out to answer in *Nightmarch*, developing her analysis through a riveting and beautifully written account of her arduous trek, over several nights, with a Naxalite platoon from Bihar into Jharkhand, together with her reflections upon the experience of living among Adivasis in different parts of Jharkhand over more than four years. The relationships that she observed between the revolutionaries and the tribal people of eastern India are at the heart of her analysis. She combines empathy with the revolutionaries and sympathy for their aims with a clear-headed

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assessment of the contradictions that undermine the movement. The book reads at times like an elegy for the failed dream of revolution, and it leaves – for this reader, certainly – a profound sense of sadness.

Shah first encountered the Naxalites (she treats the terms "Naxalite" and "Maoist" as interchangeable) in her first period of fieldwork 20 years ago, when they began to recruit some of her friends in the village in Jharkhand where she then lived. Her initial impressions were that the supposed revolutionaries were not much more than protection racketeers who were successfully muscling their way into the local markets of rent-seeking (see Shah 2006). And by her own account, she did not, at the time, find much reason for challenging the implication of the question posed by her PhD supervisor from the London School of Economics, "Are they really just a bunch of thugs?" But subsequent evidence of the success of the Naxalites in winning support in the Adivasi areas of eastern India took Shah back to Jharkhand, wanting to understand how life had changed, in consequence, among the tribal people with whom she had lived. She did not, she writes, expect necessarily to meet a Naxalite but the new area in which she chose to work turned out to be what the Naxalites considered to be their "Red Capital" or Lalgaon, one of their two strongholds in the country. "I soon realised," Shah writes, "that the guerillas were everywhere – in every house, in every village and in every forest" (p. xix).

Living in Lalgaon, as she did for 18 months from 2008, Shah came to understand how many young Adivasi men and women – or often, literally, boys and girls – moved in and out of the Naxalite squads, perhaps seeking independence from parental rule, pursuing love affairs, or for other reasons escaping from the limits of village life. The Naxalites made another home for them, and going away to join the Naxalites or going away to labour in brickworks or construction sites might serve the same emotional needs. Shah writes,

> … just as the opportunity to migrate to distant places for six months of the year had become part and parcel of the social fabric of Adivasi life in the hills and forests, so too had the ability to join the Naxalites. (p. 129)

Staying in Lalgaon, too, she had quite frequent encounters with Naxalite cadres – including one which involved a frightening interrogation by a character whom she calls Vikas, who later played a significant role in the nightmarch. It was as a result of her acceptance by some of the Naxalite leaders that Alpa Shah was invited, late in her stay in Jharkhand, to travel into Bihar to meet a particular Central Committee leader who is one of the oldest veterans of the struggle.

Shah begins her story of "Going Underground" with a vivid account of the bus journey from Ranchi into Bihar, and of her making contact with one anonymous "receiver" (the "man with a squint") and then a second (the "man in blue jeans"), through whom she finds her way to a meeting with a striking young guerilla fighter called Prashant. With him she arrives at last in a "city in the forest." This

well-organised tent city, set up for the quinquennial meeting of the State-level Maoist Committee of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, is "a far cry from the dazzling skyscrapers and shopping malls of Gurgaon . . . [but] equally impressive for its grandeur and impermanence" (p. 57). There, as it turns out, Shah's meetings with "Bimal," the veteran of the Maoist leadership, are disappointing, as the old man always steers away from the personal to "well-trodden histories" of the movement. But then, thanks largely to the support of another leader, "Gyanji," whom she had already come to know in Jharkhand, Shah is allowed to participate, as the only woman and the only person not carrying a weapon, in the march back to Lalgaon, a journey of some 250 kilometres across "enemy territory," that would mean covering around 30 kilometres a night. Thus it was that Shah set out on her trek, her hair bundled into a green guerilla cap, wearing an olive-green uniform with ill-fitting trousers and a new pair of trainers on her feet, in a platoon of 30 people.

Shah gives an exciting account of dangerous journeys through the night, woven together with the stories of four of those with whom she travelled – "Prashant," "Gyanji," "Kohli," and "Vikas" – and of "Seema," the most senior woman leader whom she came to know, and Somwari, the Oraon woman with whom she lived in Jharkhand. These intimate stories provide the starting points for Shah's reflections upon different aspects of the Naxalite movement. The book is in the end, as she says, "a meditation on the contradictions, limitations, and paradoxes of emancipatory ambitions, revolutionary desires, and guerilla action" (p. xxi).

Gyanji, the senior leader, was a wanted man with a reward on his head and had been on the move as a professional revolutionary for 25 years. Well-educated and from an upper-caste family (as the "still tender soles of his feet," touchingly observed by Shah, gave away), he was widely read, able to speak polished English, and might have become a senior civil servant as his family had hoped. But he had been politicised as a university student, and was ready to make almost any sacrifice for the cause of realising a better world. Her acquaintance with Gyanji, whom Shah clearly both liked and respected, leads her to reflect at length upon the ideas of sacrifice and of renunciation, making connections with classical anthropological writing. But whereas the "renouncer," in the Hindu context, seeks liberation from the cycle of existence for himself, Gyanji spurns the selfishness of such action. He has renounced his family ties – though as it turns out he hasn't fully managed to do this, with tragic consequences – in order to fight for a new world. Crushing their personal histories of relative privilege was crucial for the Naxalite leaders, and this too helps, Shah argues, to explain the significance of martyrdom among these revolutionaries. Gyanji she sees as a kind of living martyr.

In the course of the nightmarch Gyanji clashes frequently with Vikas, the platoon commander, a man from a tribal village who had risen through the ranks. As a mid-level leader Vikas had financial responsibility, to collect money from

contractors, keep accounts and redistribute funds – always with the possibility of "earning" for himself. Gyanji had heard that Vikas owned a Bolero jeep, and had married a second, educated wife whom he kept in Ranchi. His suspicions about Vikas are heightened during the march, when it seemed (on two occasions) that the platoon commander was leading them dangerously close to Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) barracks. Shah had disliked Vikas's machismo from her first encounter with him, and it comes as no surprise to her when Gyanji finds soft porn on Vikas's phone. In his everyday behaviour Vikas betrays the values of the movement for which Gyanji was ready to sacrifice almost everything. Gyanji eventually speaks of Vikas as a "Frankenstein": "From a beautiful dream and beautiful people, he said, they were producing the very people who would destroy the movement and its vision for a different world" (p. 192). We learn at the end of the book that Vikas did indeed defect from the movement and set up a renegade mercenary gang ready to work with the police, of the kind that threatened the platoon at one point during the nightmarch. The Naxalites have to set up young men like Vikas to run the rackets through which they raise the funds they need, from mining companies and other large-scale corporations, from the trade in forest products, and from the black economy around state infrastructural projects. Shah calls them "protection rackets"; Gyanji speaks of "taxation." But by giving more young men opportunities to "earn," the Naxalites end up encouraging capitalist and individualistic values that are opposed to those they themselves espouse. Gyanji was clearly aware of this, saying to Shah, "our capacity has been reduced to the military needs of the war" (p. 186).

In contrast to Vikas, Kohli, who is still "only a kid," always shows care for others, including Alpa Shah, to whom he is deputed as a bodyguard for the duration of the march. It turns out that Shah knew him already as the son of a familiar teashop owner in her place back in Jharkhand. Kohli had run away from home after a quarrel over a trivial incident – in common with so many others. His example leads Shah to reflect upon the category of "child soldiers." Quite often it is assumed that child soldiers have been subjected to coercion and terrorised into becoming fighters – but this clearly was not the case so far as Kohli and many others like him among the Naxalite fighters were concerned. Prashant, too, from whom Shah takes her leave at the start of the nightmarch, who is from a middle-caste family of small farmers in southern Bihar, had first met Naxalites as a very young boy while he was out watching over the family goats. He had become fascinated by them and had left home to join them permanently when he was only about 10 years old – in spite of his knowledge of the pain this caused his mother, whom he loved. By the time his family's house was destroyed by the landlords, he was 16 and ready to become a full-fledged fighter.

It is remarkable, Shah argues, that in a country so deeply divided by caste and class, Naxalite leaders like Gyanji from upper-caste, educated and relatively wealthy backgrounds, who have broken with their pasts and made sacrifices for their ideals

of human emancipation, should have come together in the revolutionary movement with some from India's most marginalised communities, including especially Dalits and Adivasis, like Vikas and Kohli, who "have drifted in and out of the revolutionary community as its foot soldiers" (pp. 254–55). What explains why such Adivasi young men should have gravitated towards the Naxalites? Shah refers to the different arguments that have been advanced in the literature. Was it that the Adivasis, sandwiched between the Naxals and the security forces, had little choice but to take up arms on one side or the other? Was it because of "greed," and the possibility of deriving rents from protection rackets? Or was it because of "grievance" over the failings of the state in their regard – the ways in which the state has failed to deliver services and better livelihoods, while also often subjecting them to abuse and even tyranny (as at the hands of forest officers)? Is it, then, that the Naxalites have won support because they have made up for the failings of the state, by establishing schools and free health camps, by taking over trade in forest products and raising the wages that Adivasis receive for their work, and driving away the forest officers? All of this actually happened, but Shah's most important argument is that the Naxalites have won support because of the "emotional intimacy" that they have established with the Adivasis:

> . . . over the time I lived in Lalgaon, I realised that regardless of the success or failure of their programmes and campaigns, the much deeper appeal of the Naxalites was the respect and dignity with which they treated the Adivasis, looking upon them as equal human beings. (p. 136)

While emphasising the humaneness of the guerillas, however, Shah also worries about the lack of understanding of Adivasi society that they display. She finds that the woman leader whom she comes to know, Seema, has been given the task of fighting "feudalism and patriarchy that the Maoists *thought* existed within Adivasi communities" (p. 241, emphasis added). But Seema seems to have little understanding of the relative gender equality that characterises social relations in Adivasi society, or of the autonomy enjoyed by someone like Shah's "sister," Somwari. Shah is appalled by the way in which, as it seems to her, the Naxalites' organising of an International Women's Day celebration ends up reproducing patriarchal values. And in spite of their commitment to the principle of gender equality, Seema says that in practice, most men in the leadership find it difficult to deal with. Gender relations are treated as a "women's issue," to be taken up by the separate women's wing. The Naxalites' imposition of an anti-alcohol campaign, too, betrays their lack of understanding of the significance of making and drinking beer and wine, men and women together, in Adivasi society. This signifies women's relatively equal status (see pp. 218–19), and the culture of drinking among Adivasis is altogether different from that commonly found among upper-caste men in Indian society, who hide themselves in darkened bars. So the Maoists (as Shah tends to refer to the revolutionaries at this point in her story) end up harassing women like Somwari, whom they want to serve, sending in one of their young female cadres to smash Somwari's clay pots used in making wine from *mahua* flowers. Shah doesn't

like, either, the rather patronising way in which even Gyanji refers to boys like Kohli, and she is concerned by Gyanji's view that "whether you like it or not, it is inevitable that their cultures will be obliterated with development" (p. 150).

Alpa Shah's lucid and compelling book – an anthropological *tour de force*, in the words of one commentator, quoted on the fly-leaf – is a compassionate but honest assessment of the Naxalite or Maoist movement, and of the relationships between the revolutionaries and the Adivasis. She is clearly sympathetic to the aspirations and the values of a man like Gyanji. But she is blunt about the contradictions that undermine the movement, and the failures of its theory and practice, summing up her analysis in the terse, concluding "Fieldnotes on Making New Futures." Striking contradictions include the Naxalites' reliance "on the support of pre-existing family relations [that] anchor one to the present and past" (p. 256). The constant flux of youth like Kohli who move in and out of the guerilla army is at once a testament to the way the Naxalites have established kinship relations with Adivasis and also a problem for them. And even Gyanji, eventually to his great personal cost and to that of the movement, cannot altogether relinquish family ties for the sake of the utopian new society that he seeks. The dependence of the movement for funds on protection rackets is another clear contradiction, creating the Vikases who betray the movement; and the movement has become locked, too, into a spiral of violence, which means that most of its energies are devoted to the needs of war. Failures of theory and practice include the lack of understanding of Adivasi society that the movement betrays ("they had not given the 'indigenous question' sufficient thought," p. 258), and the neglect of inequalities within the movement itself and of the need to nurture low-caste, Adivasi, and women leaders. Finally, there is the problem that Shah points to through her many observations on the effects of the country's booming capitalist economy as lying in the adherence of the movement to an outdated analysis of the Indian economy as "semi-feudal" and "semi-colonial" (considered in a special issue of the *Journal of Agrarian Change*; and see Shah 2013a). This, she says, has become somewhat akin to a religious ideology among them and may have helped to maintain the solidarity of the Naxalite leadership, but it has unquestionably stood in the way of their addressing the issues that now affect the poor of India, in the context of the processes of rapid capitalist development that have overtaken the country.

Adivasis, in the areas of Jharkhand where Alpa Shah has done ethnographic fieldwork, have historically seen the state, she thinks, as an alien entity – and they have been rather like what Pierre Clastres referred to as "societies against the state" (cited in Shah 2013b, p. 98). This has changed, partly at least, as a result of the actions of the Naxalites. So the final contradiction, Shah observes, is in the irony that

> a movement fighting against the character of Indian democracy has expanded its reach amongst people who had previously been left on the margins of the state, alienated from it.

The Naxalites have actually ended up nurturing

> Dalits and Adivasis who would ultimately seek not the withering away of the state that is the revolutionary ideal, but would want a greater share of the state, as a part of it.

Not challenging the state, in other words, so much as wanting greater control over it (p. 259; see also Shah 2013b).

There are connections here with the arguments of another scholar, Alf Gunvald Nilsen, who has studied activism among Adivasis in western India, in what he calls the "Bhil Heartland" (Nilsen 2018). Nilsen has not had quite the same sort of ethnographic immersion in Adivasi society as Shah, but his research on democratic organising and community-level activism among Bhils, which flourished in the 1990s, is based on work that he carried on over eighteen months, in partnership with some of the activists themselves. The two movements that he studied had, he shows, "some significant achievements in terms of curbing the excesses of a notoriously high-handed state and fostering a culture of 'insurgent citizenship' [James Holston's concept; see Holston 2008] among the Bhil communities" (Nilsen 2018, p. 6). Ultimately, his point is that subaltern movements such as those he studied are both *enabled* and *constrained* by the state. But their objective is to establish greater control over the state, to make it work for them as opposed to repressing them. Rather than the revolutionary path towards emancipation that the Naxalites have taken, Nilsen, following an old argument of Andre Gorz's (1967), advocates "non-reformist reform" – reforms aimed at stimulating "'the development of 'structures of popular power' (Gorz 1975, p. 144) that can enable emancipatory transformation" (Nilsen 2018, p. 253).

A possible starting point for the development of such "structures of popular power" might be found, Nilsen suggests, in the extensive rights-based legislation passed in India in the early years of the present century – the Right to Information Act and the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, both of 2005; the Forest Rights Act of 2006; the Right to Education Act of 2009; the National Food Security Act of 2013, and even the Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act of the same year. These together have made for what has been called India's "new rights agenda," which involves not only the establishment of legally justiciable social and economic rights, but also the reform of governance to promote greater transparency and accountability (Ruparelia 2013). There is no doubt, as Nilsen clearly recognises, that the rights legislation and the programmes set up to implement it, do not necessarily lead to a challenge to the interests of dominant classes. As he says,

> whether rights-based legislation can be made to serve counter-hegemonic trends or not depends, most fundamentally, on how this new legal regime is appropriated by social movements from below in determinate locales. (Nilsen 2018, p. 255).

But there is evidence from a number of studies that he documents, showing that the legislation does have the potential to animate radical struggles.

Nightmarch is an epitaph, perhaps, to a flawed revolutionary dream, but it also shows – and this is Alpa Shah's final observation – how the Naxalite movement has emboldened Adivasis and Dalits to demand their right to be treated on equal terms with dominant castes and classes, and to secure a greater space for themselves within Indian democracy. The struggle for a more humane world goes on.

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