

Book Review

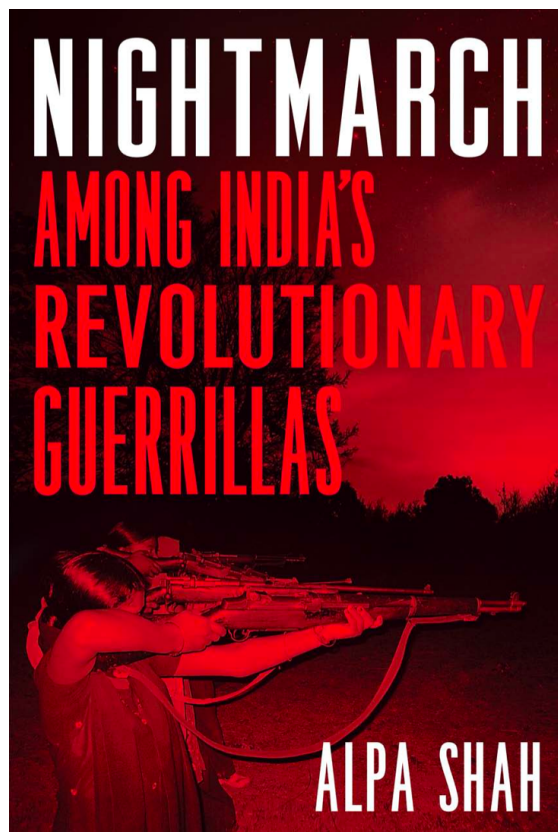
## Review of *Nightmarch: Among India's Revolutionary Guerrillas* by Alpa Shah

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The remarkable thing about this ethnography is that you barely feel like reading one. *Nightmarch* is an absorbing account of revolutionary action and everyday political contradiction by London School of Economics Professor of Anthropology Alpa Shah. Fascinated by the longest-standing rebellion of our time, Shah conducted long-term fieldwork among Naxalite guerrillas in India. The Naxalites – officially, the “Communist Party of India (Maoist)” – have been in armed resistance to the Indian nation-state since 1967. The guerrillas, who spend most of their time ‘underground,’ constantly moving through sequestered hills and forests, are by no means merely communist dreamers and extremists, but instead gather lower-caste villagers and indigenous Adivasis under their revolutionary banner. With both terrorist attacks and educational work, they fight expropriation, abuse, and systemic injustice – and are brutally persecuted by state security forces for doing so. Researching under these charged circumstances, Shah attempts to understand why poor people consciously choose to abandon the world’s largest democracy and instead battle it as rebels. What ideals and pressures make them join a seemingly hopeless and life-threatening insurgency? How do armed guerrillas live and think in the heart of an economic powerhouse? What moral and organizational tensions can the revolutionary movement handle as it grapples with bystanders in rural villages, female combatants, or with the natural resources in the areas they control?

Shah’s book not only sheds light on these questions but presents the ethnographic findings in narratively captivating style. She reports along a seven-night trek through the rural parts of eastern India. Unexpectedly, Shah – disguised as a male combatant – joined a battalion of Naxalites after interviewing leaders of the movement in order to return to the familiar Adivasi villages where she spent the bulk of her fieldwork. What she experiences on this exhausting and hazardous journey prompts her to reflect extensively on the ongoing rebellion, the living conditions of its fighters, and

the impacts of conflict, violence, and unexpected moral contradictions on the pursuit of a more just world.

So far, this sounds as if Shah would risk deviating from genuine ethnography into a gripping yet ultimately shallow travelogue. Fortunately, her crafty prose, while at times risking too much pathos, steers clear of an adventure account and succeeds in opening an anthropological analysis to a wider public. Indeed, the book, although discussing the juicy topic of revolution in literary style, remains tightly organized around classic ethnographic themes such as caste, sacrifice, gender, egalitarianism, ideology versus materiality, or the ambiguity of intimate social relations. The bibliographic essay at the end grounds her descriptions further and provides specialists with a genealogy of her arguments.

This combination of accessible style and comprehensive analysis already starts in the first of seven parts of the book, corresponding to the seven nights spent on her *Nightmarch*. We follow Shah on the gradual way from fieldwork among Adivasi villagers into the prosecuted rebel groups themselves and are provided with an account of the Maoists’ initial formation and their party’s changeful history over past decades. Part Two continues to introduce guerrilla interlocutors, their diverging backgrounds and personal reasons to join the rebellion. Here, Shah also describes the strikingly smooth organization of Naxalite underground activity and their ability to secretly unite at sizable meetings and lead dignified lives on the run. Part Three grapples with individual motivations to put one’s life on the spot for a rather desperate fight for a fairer world. The beauty of Shah’s monograph is that she skillfully connects the intimate illumination of a character with an examination of literature on themes such as personhood, renunciation, and sacrifice. Part Four drives forward this exploration of motives but now focuses on lower-class rebels and their often fluctuating, contingent participation in the Naxalite squads. It is not revolutionary ideals but rather mundane conflicts with parents or dire economic conditions that

can make people end up devoting themselves to the communist cause. Shah also gives a glimpse of how the Naxalite movement not only employs terrorism and violence to achieve their goals, but enacts land redistribution, education, protest rallies and efforts to create more egalitarian community structures. These projects, while frequently entailing undesired effects – such as police violently cracking down on innocent villagers – are what makes them known (and famous) among Adivasis. Part Five sticks with the inherent ambivalences of Naxalite action by attending to machismo, personal ambition, and the often self-defeating attempts to generate income from illicit sources. Are Maoists employing Mafiosi tactics if they ‘protect’ infrastructure projects or do they rightfully elicit ‘taxes’ from multinational companies to fund their emancipatory struggle? Here, Shah lays out the political economy of rebellion in its multifaceted morality. Part Six centers on women’s experiences of living with, besides, or among the Naxalite rebels. Shah uncovers the prevalent patriarchal structures determining much of the rebellion’s trajectory which lets its ‘emancipatory’ objectives suddenly appear dubious. This not only includes attention to gender, but also its intersections with class and caste. As much as Naxalite leaders like to proclaim an equal society, inequalities prevail amidst the movement itself. In the final Part Seven, the storyline is brought to a smooth close. Shah narrates how the trek ends and how she transitions back into non-Guerilla territory, eventually London. Following up on the life trajectories of her interlocutors she concludes by centering on the inevitable themes of any insurgency: death and incarnation.

Across her narrative trek, Alpa Shah irons layer after layer (or night after night) on top of each other. Her account of Maoist Guerrillas’ lived experience is an ethnographic description in the best sense of the term: it uses a riveting narrative full of details to conceptually analyze a local world with nuance and complexity. The felicitous combination underpins the status of *Nightmarch* as an outstanding ethnography of revolution and resistance. Shah sets a high standard for future ethnographies, in terms of writing, in terms of thematic relevance and in terms of fieldwork proficiency.

*“Shah sets a high standard for future ethnographies, in terms of writing, in terms of thematic elaboration and in terms of fieldwork proficiency.”*

- Tim Burger on *Nightmarch: Among India’s Revolutionary Guerrillas*