

From Alpa Shah's book, Nightmarch: Among India's Revolutionary Guerrillas

India: Some Questions For the World Revolutionary Movement

Friday 9 September 2022, by [MASSIAH Gustave](#) (Date first published: 21 June 2022).

I am very happy and honored to share in her presence the presentation of Alpa Shah's book. Thank you to the Quilombo bookstore for having organized this evening and thank you to Naïké Desquesnes, the editor, for having published the translation of this book and for the relevant and brilliant introduction she wrote.

A presentation of the book by Alpa Shah

It is a very beautiful and important book, and I would like to recommend you to get it and read it. It is an immersion in this struggle of more than fifty years against inequalities and discriminations, for liberation and for a communist and egalitarian society. A journey, a march with this little-known guerrilla and in many ways exemplary of the paths to emancipation. Alpa Shah walked with the Naxalites in Jharkhand, in the North-East of India. She tells us about this meeting and this dive into the guerrilla warfare. She gives us an epic through some emblematic characters who give rhythm to her march and the understanding of this odyssey. We discover Gyanji, an old and respected revolutionary sage; Prashand, a small shepherd who joins the Naxalites and reads several books at the same time, including Alexandra Kollontai; Kohli, a teenager in revolt against his father and who discovers the fraternity of the guerrilla; Vikas, an executive tempted by power and money in whom she suspects a Frankenstein; Seema, a guerrilla executive and Somwari, a bearer of Adivasi values, feminists who refuse the patriarchy.

This book is exceptional because it combines and interweaves four remarkable dimensions. First, it is a personal testimony, the ability to surpass oneself based on one's situation and history. Second, it is a revolutionary commitment and a fidelity to this commitment without ignoring its limits and contradictions. It is also an anthropological approach, resituated in relation to the State and to capital, inscribed in the long history, by showing what the first peoples can bring in the renewal of the relationship between the human societies and the Nature. Finally, it is a rigorous scientific approach based on referenced and identified sources, inscribed in an approach that starts from Marxism while seeking to renew this approach. These four dimensions complement each other and combine to offer a pleasant and engaging reading.

The book begins with a presentation of the Naxalite movement in the overall Indian revolutionary movement. It sees itself as an heir to the world communist movement. At the end of the 1970s, there was a constellation of communist parties in India. The debates are often virulent; they concern in particular the use of weapons, mass organizations, the parliamentary system. The armed struggle is the choice of the advanced form of the revolutionary struggle. It is opposed to repression and counter-revolution. Its limits and contradictions should not make us forget what underlies it. The objective is to build an egalitarian communist society. The Maoist reference puts forward the revolutionary role of the peasantry, the anti-colonial struggle, the investigation which requires

starting from the masses to return to the masses. The slogans express what the revolutionaries take for granted: to fight against inequalities, for social justice, against landlords, against caste barriers, for workers' rights, for the right to land. It is about mobilizing the excluded for the right to dignity. Since the 1990s, the mobilization of the Naxalite movement has been very strong among the Adivasis, a term that means "first inhabitants of India". The first peoples have retained their ability to link individual autonomy and collective creativity, without doing so at the expense of others.

Alpa Shah focuses on understanding the deeper meaning of revolutionary commitment. She affirms that subversion is necessary to democracy and integral to humanity. She insists on the priority given to egalitarian values, reminding us that the left is first and foremost the struggle for equality. The Naxalites, for thirty years, have been fighting against inequalities. They have led the struggle for livelihoods and the defence of equality at the same time. They have consistently opposed colonization and then the strategy of neoliberal capitalism. They have been able to assert the humanity of rebels reinforced by the awareness of material injustices. They oppose the offensive strategy of the extractivists who seek to purge the territory of its inhabitants in order to circumvent the obligation to sell Adivasi land to Adivasis. The guerrillas want to free the forests from the military and the multinationals and return them to the people who have maintained them. It is their mission to accompany the Adivasis in the transition from primitive communists to true conscious communists.

The primacy given to the revolutionary commitment is reinforced by the capacity to keep a critical mind on the dangers and the deviations. It accompanies the danger of the inevitable passage through violence and armed confrontation. The military and ideological offensive explains in large part the contradictions and the weakening of the movement. One of the great dangers of deviation is linked to the search for the means necessary for the guerrilla war. The financing of the insurgency goes through the protection racket. It becomes difficult to isolate the movement from wealthy sectors and troubled actors. This leads to behaviors that do not differentiate themselves from the corrupt and that even lead to the appearance of renegades. These compromises lead some to theorize that the passage through capitalism is almost inevitable, even necessary. There is also an involuntary promotion of patriarchal behavior. The guerrillas have come to idolize the monogamous family and to adopt a morality that reinforces patriarchy, especially since many women have left to escape patriarchy rather than staying in their communities to fight it. For some guerrilla leaders, the image of Adivasis is a stereotype of an innocent and vulnerable people that succeeds that of the savage and barbaric Adivasis who must be protected by moralism in relation to alcohol and sexual relations considered too free. Popular violence and authoritarianism clash with living realities and accentuate fragilities with the danger of an anti-democratic evolution.

At each stage of the march, while living the experiences, Alpa Shah addresses fundamental questions that she develops in the light of this journey. Along the way, she addresses the question of sacrifice and renunciation, of liberation and of the violence that accompanies any total commitment to the struggle. Her reflection on sacrifice puts forward a hypothesis: in a constrained situation, the opposite of sacrifice is suicide. The new solidarities allow to transcend and go beyond the ordinary world. She connects the adolescent rebellion and the armed struggle. It inscribes the revolutionary war against the Indian state to the world impulse for a communist society. It shows the humanity and intimacy that underlie egalitarian ideals. The First Peoples defend their land to fight against their annihilation. They must oppose the advance of the State and of capital. She returns to the origins of financing, to the idea that we can help ourselves. She also returns to the danger of linking up with men of commerce at the risk of resembling them and of finding it normal to get rich. She shows the dangers of joining the underground economy to finance the movement by linking up with traffickers. How to introduce other rules, to refuse or modify the rules of extortion, to avoid not being in control and to manage not to succumb. With the meeting with Somwari, she will deepen her

reflection on the fight against patriarchy. She will broaden her reflection to a more theoretical and fundamental approach of the relations between gender, generations, classes and castes.

Some questions for the world revolutionary movement

After this presentation of Alpa Shah's book, I would like to point out some of the questions that arise for the revolutionary movement in the current situation and how her approach sheds light on.

The history of the world revolutionary movement intertwines the struggle against capitalism and the struggle against imperialism. Let us suggest three periods. The first period goes from the First International to the revolution of 1917. The second period goes from 1920 to the beginning of the 1980s; it is the period of decolonization and anti-imperialism. It includes an innovative moment with the movements of 1965 to 1973 in the world. The third period, from the end of the 1970s to 2008, is marked by alterglobalism in the struggle against neoliberalism. From 2008, the succession of crises (financial, climatic, pandemic, geopolitical) could herald a new period.

The Naxalite movement is part of the long history of the world revolutionary movement. It is one of the moments of this long history. It is part of the link between the communist movement that began with the 1st International and the struggles of decolonization. The first great period of struggle, starting with the First International, from 1865, will deepen with the Commune, and in 1905 with the revolution of the soviets; it leads to the revolution of 1917. Without forgetting, also in 1905, the Mexican and Zapatista peasant revolution. A second period begins with the Congress of the Peoples of the East, in Baku in 1920, which proposes the strategic alliance between the national liberation movements and the workers' movements. The Congress of Oppressed Peoples, in Brussels in 1927, puts forward the right of peoples to self-determination and national independence. It includes the long march started in 1934 and the Chinese revolution of 1949. The Bandung conference in 1955 of the first heads of state of Africa and Asia, with India, China, Indonesia, Egypt will mix the new states and liberation movements. In Bandung, Chou en Lai declared: the States want their independence, the nations their liberation, the peoples their revolution.

The history of the revolutionary movements of this period is to be studied in depth. The Naxalites recall its importance and its underestimation. Alpa Shah recalls the reference to the Peruvian Shining Path, to the Philippine movement. She links it to the prolonged armed struggle put forward by Che Guevara. We can also recall the uprisings in Madagascar, the Brazilian focos, the Vietnamese revolution, the Algerian decolonization, the liberation of the Portuguese colonies, the struggle against apartheid in South Africa, Palestine, ... It is to this period that the Naxalite movement is linked. It defines itself as Maoist because it takes up the references drawn from the Chinese revolution: to lead a prolonged popular war characterized by the long march, to surround the cities by the countryside, to seize the State, to build an egalitarian communist society.

A new period of revolutionary struggles corresponds to the years 1968; Immanuel Wallerstein proposes to retain the period 1965 to 1973, fertile in new proposals. The response of imperialism will be the neoliberalism experimented in Chile from 1973 and imposed through the debt crisis and structural adjustment programs. A new period of revolutions is to be considered with the uprisings in the plazas since 2011, which have been repressed but have not yet reached their full potential.

A new question is being asked of the revolutionary movement: what are the most advanced forms of the revolutionary movement today? Alpa Shah points out that the Naxalite movement has reached its limits. It has suffered fierce and continuous repression. More generally, the resistance movements in India have achieved results, even if the situation of the popular strata remains unacceptable. For example, in 2005, social movements, including a large number of Dalit organizations, obtained the passage of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, which provides all rural households that

request it with a guarantee of 100 days of work paid at the minimum wage. On the scale of India, this is considerable and can open up a perspective for all the peoples of the South. Similarly, the Adivasis have obtained a law that forbids the sale of Adivasis land to non- Adivasis. The movement has reached its limits also because of the change of period. The armed struggle represented the most advanced point of the world revolutionary movement that emerged from decolonization. It has made it possible to define the forms of revolutionary violence. The question is asked: what is the most advanced form of the revolutionary movement today and in particular how to define the anti-imperialist dimension of the struggles of the peoples in the current situation.

The fundamental question posed to the revolutionary movement is the strategic question, that of social transformation and power. Immanuel Wallerstein insisted a lot on the necessary renewal of the revolutionary strategy. He reminded us that the bourgeoisie had defined a strategy since Cromwell: to create a party, to conquer the state, to change society. In the First International, the debate focused on the adoption of this strategy to build socialism. After many debates, notably after the Commune, and the debate on the State, the workers' movement renewed this strategy. Today, the question is open. To create a party to conquer the State translates into a party-State even before having conquered the State, and the State is not a neutral means to build a new society. This is what led the alterglobalist movement to seek the autonomy of society in relation to the State and to deepen the distinction between the movement form and the party form. This questioning of the State puts the very definition of democracy back at the center of the debate, challenged by a profound cultural change of the new generations on the questions of representation and delegation.

The revolutionary movement of the next period is also confronted with the necessary redefinition of internationalism. Alterglobalism proposes itself as an extension of internationalism considering neoliberal globalization as a new phase of capitalism. Internationalism is today confronted with the necessary redefinition of the period that has not yet considered the rupture of decolonization. In the formula of Chou en Lai in Bandung, in 1955, the States had their independence and we see the limits of it, the nations want their liberation which will lead to a deep evolution of the States beyond the Nation States, it is an evolution that is just beginning. And how can the world system be organized from the emancipation of the peoples?

The alterglobalization movement must renew itself. It has gone through several periods in its opposition to neoliberalism. From 1973 to 1989, it was driven by the struggles against debt and structural adjustment in the countries of the South. From 1990 to 1999, it organized major global demonstrations against the imposition of a new world order controlled by the Bretton Woods institutions (IMF, World Bank, World Trade Organization) under the slogan: "international law must not be subordinated to business law". After the Seattle demonstrations, it opposed the World Social Forum to the Davos Economic Forum. Since 2008, the succession of crises opens a new period: financial crisis, austerity response of capitalism mixing austerity and authoritarianism, popular insurrections since 2011, awareness of the climate and ecological crisis, pandemic crisis, geopolitical and military crisis.

The invention of the revolutionary movement in a new period requires the re-appropriation of the history of its struggles in the different regions of the world. Alpa Shah's book illustrates the importance of the Naxalite movement, which is too often ignored or neglected in all these struggles. It is part of the depth of human history. Without neglecting nations and states, the peoples inscribe their history, their culture and their languages in large regions. We can propose to distinguish three large regions in the Asian continent: Chinese Asia, South East Asia (Indonesia, Korea, Japan, Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam) and South Asia (India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka). Alpa Shah's book recalls the history of Indian communist parties and shows the interest and wealth of the Naxalite movement as one of the stages of the revolutionary movement. She also reminds us of the importance of the movements in India as we could see in 2004 at the World Social Forum in Mumbai

with the processions of Dalits marching with their banners in the streets of the alterglobalist village designed by PK Das; the parallel Forum organized by the Naxalites; as we could also see with the success of the communist party in Kerala and in the Federal Democratic Republic of Nepal. Moreover, alterglobalism is not limited to the Indian communist parties. The Gandhian movement Ektaparishad, under the initiative of Rajagopal, launched an international march, modelled on the Salt March that Gandhi had launched against British colonization. The marchers were to go to the United Nations headquarters in Geneva, where they were to be joined by other world marches, to fight against poverty, inequality and discrimination. They started their journey from Delhi; the march had to be stopped in Armenia, in the winter of 2020, due to the Covid pandemic.

Alpa Shah's book is very topical. It highlights the new radicalities that will characterize the new period and the revolutionary openings. It refers to the class struggle and the reference to the centrality of the alliance between the workers' movement and the peasants' movement. It emphasizes the strategic elements that emerge. The precariat in relation to the rise of the middle classes in the wage-earning sector, among the peasants and the small traders. It highlights the importance of the fight against patriarchy and the strength of feminisms. It shows that the fight against inequalities and discriminations prolongs the anticolonial liberation. It situates the considerable advances made by indigenous peoples in the awareness of their profound humanity and in their relationship with Nature.

I would like to emphasize the importance of movements in the relationship between social and ecological issues, using a few examples from the South Asian region. The Bhopal disaster, in 1984, with the explosion of the Union Carbide factory, is considered one of the most serious industrial catastrophes in the world. It caused thousands of victims and continues to do so. It has highlighted the impunity of multinationals who put forward the legal independence of subsidiaries. The social movement has revealed the consequences of the role of multinationals in the global legal space. The second example is the Pakistan Fisherfolk Forum (PFF), led by Mohamed Ali Shah, who passed away recently. He was one of the organizers of the World Social Forum in Karachi in 2006. The PFF organizes fishermen and their families. Confronted with the pollution of the Indus delta, it has become a very active environmentalist association. Continuously arrested by the border guards, the fishermen are committed to peace on the Kashmir issue. After the floods of 2010, fishermen were evicted from the beaches in favor of luxury hotels. The peasant movement is a remarkable example of the radical nature of movements. La Via Campesina, with nearly 200 million members, is the largest organized social movement in the world. The peasant movement has succeeded in persuading the world, starting with themselves, that agriculture is more modern than agribusiness, compatible with the defense of Nature. La Via Campesina has put forward food sovereignty and the banning of GMOs.

For a theoretical renewal and a new project, a mobilizing narrative. The period that begins is full of dangers. It shows the emergence of reactionary forces mixing right-wing and extreme right-wing ideas. This rise of extreme right-wing ideas and sometimes fascist regimes is a reaction to the rise of new radicalisms and new trends. For example, the passage to demographic decline that has begun in many regions, outside of India and Africa, renews the role of the anti-racism movement, extends the struggles of decolonization and discrimination, and reinforces the radicalism of migrant and diaspora movements.

In the coming period, we will need to renew an understanding of evolution based on the necessary consideration of changes as the Marxist approach had allowed. From this point of view, Alpa Shah's approach contributes to this renewal by linking social, political, philosophical and anthropological approaches. We will also need a new mobilizing narrative that takes over from decolonization and sovietism.

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P.S.

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