

A Note on *Nightmarch* as the Italian Translation goes to press

In the six months between this Italian translation going to press and the first edition of *Nightmarch* appearing in the UK, there has been a step change in government repression in India. In a series of high profile arrests, well-known middle class intellectuals, poets, human rights activists and lawyers were simultaneously targeted in various cities across the country – Delhi, Mumbai, Hyderabad, Ranchi, Nagpur, for instance. It was claimed that they had Maoist links and they were called ‘Urban Naxals’.

The incarceration of less well-known people continues to take place across the country, but this latest round of repression is of a different order. It is specifically targeted at those who have fearlessly, tirelessly and openly spent their lives fighting for justice for the poor and the marginalised, battling against the illicit incarceration of people whose voices would otherwise not be heard, representing their legal cases, leading public campaigns and running fact finding missions calling the state to account, questioning its actions, highlighting human rights abuses. In effect the labelling of these lawyers, intellectuals and activists as ‘Naxalites’ or ‘Maoists’ is now being used to strike terror amongst anyone who dares to speak out for social justice and freedom of expression. It is a way of silencing dissent.

Hot on the heels of *Nightmarch* appearing on the shelves of UK bookshops, came a series of arrests and attacks across several Indian cities of alleged ‘Urban Naxals’. Sudha Bhardwaj, who taught law at one of India’s prestigious private universities in Delhi and who for years had worked as an advocate, union activist and human rights worker in Chhattisgarh, was arrested from her home in Faridabad, Delhi and taken to a prison in Pune. Gautam Navlakha, secretary of the People’s Union for Democratic Rights who had led many fact-finding missions into state (and Maoist) led atrocities in the central and eastern India, written two significant books on the Naxalites and the civil war in Central India (and had also worked as a human rights activist on Kashmir), and for years had been involved in the editing of one of India’s most widely read academic journals, was put under house arrest in Delhi. Varvara Rao, poet, human rights activists and sympathizer of the Maoists was arrested from his Hyderabad home. Human rights activists Arun Ferreira and Vernon Gonzalez were taken from their houses in Mumbai.

At the same time, the police raided the house of numerous more intellectuals and activists. Among those harassed were Professor Anand Teltumbde of the Goa Institute of Management and Professor K Satyanarayan of English and Foreign Language University in Hyderabad, both internationally known intellectuals who have significantly shaped the field of Dalit scholarship in India. The police also raided the Ranchi premises of Father Stan Swamy who had been responsible for

several movements against Adivasi displacement, fighting for their constitutional rights, and had led numerous critical studies such as one to show that thousands of Adivasis imprisoned as Naxalites in the jails of Jharkhand were kept incarcerated for years on end without being brought to trial.

These arrests and raids came just two months after the incarceration of Shoma Sen, head of the English department of Nagpur University and activist, human rights activist and poet Sudhir Dhawale, advocate Surendra Gadling (who at the time was fighting many of the cases of political prisoners in Maharashtra), forest rights activist Mahesh Raut and Rona Wilson who had been campaigning for political prisoners.

The crime of all those targeted was that they were 'anti-national', more specifically had Maoist links. They were charged under India's draconian anti-terror laws which allow for pre-charge sheet detention of up to six months, conditions under which bail is near impossible, and trials that often last for years and lead to years of incarceration (even if eventually there is acquittal). Human Rights Watch has said that in India the legal process itself is the punishment.

The web of accusations against those who are alleged to be Maoist widens by the day. When I last looked, it included one of India's most respected historians, Ramchandra Guha, the last Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh Digvijay Singh and Sonia Gandhi, former president of India's National Congress party.

Some have said that this persecution has taken the US McCarthy witch-hunts to a new level, and there are significant parallels with how independent voices were silenced as Communists in 1950s US and how India's human rights activists and public critiques are being silenced as Maoists today. Others compare the ongoing events to India's Emergency in 1975 when Indira Gandhi suspended civil liberties, and journalists and opposition leaders were imprisoned, the media silenced.

But a backlash of protest has followed this repression. Across the country people were so shocked at the ever-expanding charges of people said to be Naxals that, as a means of fighting back, there was a social media upsurge with people self-claiming #MeToUrbanNaxal.

Ironically, at the very moment when the government is strangling the guerrilla armies in the forests, the resistance against the government repression is giving new life to the idea of Naxalism or Maoism in India. An Indian Supreme Court Bench that tried to (unsuccessfully) intervene in preventing the police from sending some of the recently targeted activists to prison declared, 'dissent is the safety valve of democracy.' We could refine that to be, 'dissent is constitutive of democracy.'

Who could have predicted that half a century after the Naxalbari rebellion, as we approach the third decade of the twenty-first century, extreme state repression in

the country that is often called the world's largest democracy has inadvertently led to the idea of Naxalism or Maoism keeping alive the idea of democracy itself?

Alpa Shah, 13 February 2019