



# **From the Red Corridor to the Road to Development: The Decline of Left-Wing Extremism in India and Its Impact on Development in Affected States**

**Dr Hrishikesh M Bevanur**

Dept of Political Science, Maharani Cluster University Bangalore

**Abstract-** Left-Wing Extremism (LWE), commonly known as Naxalism or Maoism, has constituted one of India's most persistent and consequential internal security challenges since the Naxalbari uprising of 1967. At its peak in the late 2000s, the movement influenced an estimated 180 districts across a sprawling Red Corridor that bisected central and eastern India, inflicting severe losses of life, undermining state authority, and systematically impeding the delivery of public goods and development infrastructure to some of the country's most marginalised tribal and agrarian communities. The decade following the launch of the National Policy and Action Plan (NPAP) in 2015 witnessed a dramatic and statistically robust decline in both the geographic extent and operational intensity of LWE: by April 2025, affected districts had contracted to eighteen across seven states, violent incidents had declined by over 80 percent from their 2010 peak, and resultant deaths had fallen by 86 percent. This article undertakes a multi-dimensional assessment of that decline and its developmental implications for the principal affected states -- Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Odisha, and their neighbours. Drawing on data from the Ministry of Home Affairs, NITI Aayog, National Health Mission, and peer-reviewed scholarship, the article analyses how LWE suppression has enabled accelerated infrastructure construction, financial inclusion, educational access, and healthcare delivery, while simultaneously interrogating the structural developmental deficits that persist and that, if unaddressed, risk reconstituting the conditions for LWE resurgence. The article concludes that India's experience offers a replicable but context-dependent model in which security operations and development investment must be pursued concurrently, not sequentially, and in which the resolution of underlying structural grievances -- particularly concerning tribal land and forest rights -- remains an indispensable condition for sustainable peace.

**Keywords-** Left-Wing Extremism; Naxalism; Red Corridor; post-conflict development; Chhattisgarh; Jharkhand; Odisha; tribal rights; National Policy and Action Plan; internal security.

## **I. Introduction**

The peasant uprising that erupted in the Naxalbari police station area of West Bengal in May 1967 was, in its immediate context, a localised agrarian revolt -- a confrontation between landless sharecroppers and absentee zamindars played out in the tea gardens and forest tracts of the Darjeeling hills. Over the following half century, Naxalite organisations -- most consequentially the Communist Party of India (Maoist) and its predecessor formations -- established a presence across vast swaths of central and eastern India, operating in the forested, mineral-rich, and administratively thin terrain connecting the states of Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Odisha, Maharashtra, and Andhra Pradesh.



At the insurgency's peak in the late 2000s, approximately 180 districts across ten states fell within what the Ministry of Home Affairs designated as the Red Corridor -- a zone of Naxalite influence that then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh described in 2006 as the single greatest internal security threat facing the Republic of India. The developmental cost of this presence was profound and multidimensional: LWE groups deliberately targeted infrastructure -- roads, bridges, railway lines, mobile towers, and power installations -- as instruments of guerrilla warfare, while simultaneously discouraging investment, intimidating government employees, and extracting levies from both contractors and communities.

The picture has changed dramatically since 2015. The Government of India's National Policy and Action Plan (NPAP) inaugurated a dual-track strategy combining intensified security operations with accelerated and targeted development delivery. By April 2024, affected districts had contracted to 38 across nine states -- down from 126 in 2013 -- and by early 2026, to just seven. Violent incidents declined by 81 percent between 2010 and 2024, while deaths fell by 85 percent over the same period.

This article proceeds as follows. Section Two traces the origins, peak, and structural drivers of LWE in India. Section Three analyses the mechanisms of decline encompassing both the security architecture and the development strategy deployed after 2015. Section Four undertakes a sectoral assessment of developmental change in LWE-affected states, covering infrastructure, financial inclusion, education, health, and livelihoods. Section Five examines the structural challenges and residual grievances that complicate developmental recovery. Section Six offers conclusions and policy implications. Throughout, the analysis draws on official MHA data, parliamentary replies, NITI Aayog assessments, field-based scholarship, and the broader comparative literature on insurgency and post-conflict development.

## **II. Origins, Peak, and Structural Drivers of LWE in India**

### **The Naxalbari Genealogy and Organisational Evolution**

The ideological origins of Indian Naxalism lie in the Maoist critique of parliamentary communism: the argument advanced most forcefully by Charu Mazumdar that India's rural semi-feudal structure could not be transformed through elections and that only armed agrarian revolution would deliver land to the landless. The movement's initial epicentre in West Bengal gave way, over subsequent decades, to a southward and eastward spread into Andhra Pradesh, Odisha, Chhattisgarh, and Jharkhand -- states sharing a common profile of mineral wealth, dense forest cover, large Scheduled Tribe populations, and deficient governance.

The formation of the Communist Party of India (Maoist) in 2004, through the merger of the People's War Group and the Maoist Communist Centre, created the unified organisational command that drove the insurgency to its peak intensity between 2005 and 2010.

### **Structural Drivers: Land, Forest, and Governance Deficit**

The academic literature on LWE's social base is in broad agreement that the movement's recruitment capacity derived primarily from structural deprivation rather



than ideological conversion. The states constituting the Red Corridor -- Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, and Odisha in particular -- consistently rank at the bottom of national development indices. In the most LWE-affected districts, literacy rates in 2011 ranged from 35 to 51 percent, infant mortality exceeded 60 per 1,000 live births, and a majority of households lacked access to formal banking, all-weather roads, and legal forest rights.

Three structural factors deserve particular emphasis. First, the question of forest and land rights: tribal communities across the Red Corridor had, under the pre-2006 legal regime, been systematically alienated from ancestral forest lands through forest department restrictions, diversion for mining and industrial projects, and the absence of legal title. This deprivation created a profound sense of injustice that Maoist cadres effectively exploited, positioning the organisation as a defender of tribal entitlements against a predatory state. Second, the displacement generated by resource extraction: India's mineral belt is geographically coterminous with the Red Corridor, and the accelerated mineral development of the 1990s and 2000s generated large-scale displacement of tribal communities from areas designated for coal, iron ore, and bauxite extraction, without commensurate rehabilitation.

Third, the governance vacuum: the administrative thin-ness of forest areas -- where public officials rarely ventured, schools functioned intermittently, health centres lacked drugs and staff, and justice was effectively inaccessible -- created a space in which Maoist organisations could perform state-like functions, adjudicating local disputes and extracting political legitimacy from communities that had no effective alternative.

### Peak Intensity and Developmental Cost

In 2010 -- the peak year of LWE violence by most metrics -- India recorded 1,936 violent incidents and 1,005 deaths attributable to Naxalite activity. 465 police stations across 96 districts reported LWE-related violence. Beyond the direct toll of violence, the developmental cost was substantial and self-reinforcing: Maoist groups levied taxes on infrastructure contractors, effectively adding 20-30 percent to project costs; they enforced boycotts of schools whose teachers were perceived as pro-government; they destroyed road construction equipment and mobile towers to maintain their area-denial capability; and they recruited heavily from youth populations in areas where neither the state nor the private sector offered viable livelihoods.

Table 1: Key LWE Violence Indicators, 2010-2025

Indicator	2010	2014	2019	2024	Change 2010-2024
Violent Incidents	1,936	1,091	501	374	-81%
Total Deaths (SF + Civilians)	1,005	422	202	150	-85%
LWE-Affected Districts	~180	126	90	38	-79%



Indicator	2010	2014	2019	2024	Change 2010-2024
Most Affected Districts	35 (2018 base)	35	25 (2021)	6	-83%
Attacks on Economic Infrastructure	365	~200	~80	25	-93%

Sources: MHA Annual Reports; PIB PRID 2042128 and PRID 2120771; RS Unstarred Q. No. 1042 (04.12.2024); SPMRF (2025). Note: Most affected districts data reflects 2018 sub-classification baseline.

### III. Mechanisms of Decline: The Dual-Track Strategy

#### The Security Architecture

The security component of India's anti-LWE strategy underwent significant evolution after 2014. The Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF), through its CoBRA units -- specialised jungle warfare battalions equipped and trained specifically for LWE operations -- formed the offensive core of a security architecture that expanded to encompass state-level specialised forces including Chhattisgarh's District Reserve Guard (DRG), Odisha's Special Operations Group (SOG), and Jharkhand's Jaguar force. By 2024, the number of fortified police stations in LWE-affected areas had grown from 66 to 612 -- a nine-fold increase representing a fundamental change in the permanent security footprint across the Red Corridor.

The SAMADHAN framework, formalised in 2017 by the MHA, introduced a performance management architecture for counter-LWE operations that systematically tracked indicators across the security, development, and governance dimensions of the strategy. A key operational innovation was the forward deployment of security camps into areas previously considered LWE liberated zones -- most notably the Abujmarh forest complex in Narayanpur district and the Karreguttalu Hills region on the Chhattisgarh-Telangana border. By physically occupying these terrain features, security forces deprived CPI (Maoist) units of the sanctuary and freedom of movement that sustained their guerrilla operations, while simultaneously creating conditions for welfare delivery into previously inaccessible communities.

Significant successes in leadership attrition contributed to organisational degradation: over 8,000 Maoists had surrendered in the preceding decade, and National Investigation Agency and Enforcement Directorate operations under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA) disrupted the financial networks that had sustained CPI (Maoist)'s operational capacity.

#### Development as Counter-Insurgency: The NPAP Framework

Parallel to the intensification of security operations, the NPAP's development component substantially accelerated the delivery of infrastructure and public services in LWE-affected districts. Central financial assistance to LWE-affected states through



the three principal dedicated schemes -- the Special Central Assistance (SCA), Security Related Expenditure (SRE), and Special Infrastructure Scheme (SIS) -- amounted to Rs. 4,350.78 crore between 2019-20 and 2023-24, representing a 300 percent increase over pre-NPAP baseline allocations.

Road construction under the Road Requirement Plan and Road Connectivity Project for LWE-Affected Areas (RCPLWE) under PMGSY-II produced 14,529 km of new roads in LWE-affected areas -- opening access corridors into forest districts that had no all-weather road connectivity, enabling both security force mobility and civilian access to markets and services. Telecommunications connectivity, systematically targeted by LWE groups as an instrument of area control, was restored and extended through the commissioning of 6,524 mobile towers under the Universal Service Obligation Fund scheme designated for LWE-affected areas.

Financial inclusion received dedicated policy attention through the opening of 1,007 bank branches and 937 ATMs in the 30 most LWE-affected districts, complemented by the establishment of 5,731 post offices as service delivery nodes for Jan Dhan accounts and Direct Benefit Transfers. Education provision was expanded through 179 Eklavya Model Residential Schools operational in Scheduled Tribe-majority blocks, 46 Industrial Training Institutes, and 49 Skill Development Centres.

#### **IV. Sectoral Development Impacts in LWE-Affected States**

##### **Infrastructure and Connectivity**

The developmental dividend most immediately visible in formerly LWE-affected districts is the transformation of physical connectivity. Before the NPAP's implementation, large areas of the Red Corridor were effectively road-less: the absence of all-weather roads was itself a deliberate product of LWE strategy, since access roads enabled government presence, contractor mobility, and the physical extension of welfare delivery infrastructure. The destruction of road construction equipment and the murder of contractors who refused to pay protection levies had, over decades, deterred investment in connectivity that the market alone would not have provided given the low income of potential road users.

The 14,529 km of roads constructed by 2024 -- with a further 3,071 km under construction -- represent one of the most significant connectivity improvements in post-independence India in any comparable period for a geographically defined region. Field surveys conducted under the aspirational districts programme have documented substantial improvements in farmers' ability to access agricultural markets, reductions in the cost of essential commodities reaching remote villages, and measurable increases in agricultural diversification as farmers can profitably produce perishable crops for the first time.

##### **Financial Inclusion**

The formal financial exclusion of LWE-affected districts was not merely a developmental deficit but a structural feature that reinforced the insurgency: in the absence of formal banking, subsistence farmers were dependent on moneylenders, contractors operated entirely in cash, and government welfare transfers were captured



by intermediaries. The Jan Dhan Yojana, launched nationally in August 2014, and the dedicated bank branch and ATM roll-out in LWE-affected districts have substantially changed this landscape.

Direct Benefit Transfers now reach a substantial majority of MGNREGS beneficiaries, PM Kisan recipients, and scholarship holders in these districts directly through bank accounts, eliminating the rent-seeking opportunities that intermediaries had previously exploited. The expansion of business correspondent networks into villages without bank branches extends the effective reach of formal finance beyond the district headquarters to which banking had previously been confined. These changes, while incremental relative to the scale of financial exclusion that preceded them, represent a qualitative shift in the relationship between state and citizen in areas where the state had previously been nearly invisible in its distributive functions.

### **Education: Access, Quality, and the Human Capital Deficit**

Education infrastructure in LWE-affected areas was among the most severely degraded by the insurgency. LWE groups targeted schools and teachers for multiple strategic purposes: they regarded government schools as instruments of cultural assimilation; they used school buildings as operational bases; and they recruited heavily from school-dropout youth populations whose limited economic prospects made the Maoist promise of purpose and belonging relatively attractive. The consequence was chronic teacher absenteeism, regular school closures, and an educational deficit that compounded across generations.

Post-NPAP educational recovery has been genuine but partial. The Eklavya Model Residential Schools represent a qualitatively important innovation for areas where daily school attendance is constrained by distance, safety concerns, and the opportunity cost of children's labour in subsistence farming households. Literacy rates in the most affected districts remain 25-35 percentage points below national averages, and learning outcomes data from National Achievement Surveys consistently places these districts at the lowest decile nationally.

### **Healthcare: Indicators and Institutional Gaps**

Healthcare infrastructure in LWE-affected districts suffered from the dual burden of structural under-investment and LWE-specific destruction: health workers were threatened or killed for providing information to security forces, and Primary Health Centres were periodically attacked or occupied. The National Health Mission's data for 2023 documents significant improvements in institutional delivery rates and child immunisation coverage in formerly LWE-affected areas, driven by the ASHA programme's successful extension into communities that previously had no community health worker presence.

Nevertheless, the healthcare gap in LWE-affected districts remains substantial. Infant mortality rates in Bastar division and in the interior blocks of Jharkhand continue to exceed 50 per 1,000 live births -- more than double the national average of 25. Malnutrition rates among Scheduled Tribe children in Narayanpur and Bijapur districts remain among the highest in the country, reflecting deficits in dietary diversity,



maternal health, and water and sanitation that cannot be resolved by healthcare delivery alone.

Table 2: Development Indicators -- Key LWE-Affected States vs. National Average (2021-23)

Indicator	Chhattisgarh	Jharkhand	Odisha	National Average
MPI Score (NITI Aayog, 2021)	0.162	0.175	0.189	0.101
Literacy Rate (Census 2011)	71.0%	67.6%	73.5%	74.0%
Infant Mortality Rate (SRS 2022)	40	37	36	25
Poverty Headcount (2021)	39.9%	42.2%	29.4%	21.9%
Road Density (km/100 sq km)	22.5	19.3	21.4	59.6

Sources: NITI Aayog MPI Baseline Report 2021; Office of the Registrar General SRS 2022; MoRTH 2023; Census of India 2011. State-level figures mask substantial intra-state variation; interior LWE-affected districts record considerably worse outcomes than state averages.

### Livelihoods and Employment

The ROSHNI Scheme, targeted at Below Poverty Line youth aged 18-35 in LWE-affected districts, has provided one of the most significant livelihood interventions in these areas, enrolling over 1.12 lakh youth in skill training and placement programmes by 2024. The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) has historically had poor implementation in LWE-affected areas, where contractor capture of funds was common; the shift to Direct Benefit Transfers has improved delivery but has not resolved the underlying challenge of creating productive employment in areas with limited private investment and constrained market access.

Agricultural livelihoods in formerly LWE-affected areas remain overwhelmingly subsistence-oriented. Forest produce -- including tendu leaves, mahua flowers, and a range of minor forest products -- represents a significant income source for tribal households, but the value chain remains dominated by state marketing boards and intermediaries who capture most of the economic surplus. The extension of the Forest Rights Act's community rights provisions in LWE-affected areas has the potential to transform the terms on which tribal communities access and benefit from forest resources, but implementation remains incomplete.

## V. Structural Challenges and Residual Risks

### Chhattisgarh as Residual Epicentre



The geographic concentration of residual LWE activity in southern Chhattisgarh -- particularly in the districts of Bijapur, Narayanpur, and Sukma -- reflects a deliberate strategic retreat by CPI (Maoist) into its most defensible terrain: dense sal and teak forests, complex river systems, and virtually no civilian infrastructure. Between 2017 and 2024, Chhattisgarh accounted for approximately 60 percent of all LWE fatalities nationally, with 833 deaths recorded across 2,610 incidents. The concentration of the remaining armed cadre in these few districts has in one sense simplified the operational challenge for security forces, but it has also concentrated the most hardened and ideologically committed elements of CPI (Maoist) in terrain that is extremely difficult for conventional military or developmental operations to penetrate.

### **The Displacement-Mining Nexus and New Grievances**

A significant risk factor for LWE resurgence -- acknowledged in scholarly literature if not consistently in official assessments -- is the potential for new grievances generated by the accelerated development itself. The expansion of mining and infrastructure projects in LWE-affected areas, accelerated precisely because improved security has made them viable, risks generating displacement and environmental degradation in communities whose historical experience of development has been one of loss rather than gain. The post-conflict political economy of Jharkhand, in particular, has been characterised by what scholars have termed exclusionary development: rapid growth in GDP driven by mineral extraction that generates benefits for urban and non-tribal populations while imposing costs disproportionately on the tribal communities whose lands are affected.

### **Governance Quality and Institutional Capacity**

The literature on post-conflict development consistently emphasises that physical reconstruction in the absence of governance improvement tends to reproduce the conditions that generated conflict (Paris, 2004). This observation carries direct analytical force for India's LWE-affected states, where the administrative capacity of district-level governance institutions -- revenue offices, forest departments, schools, health centres -- remains substantially inadequate to the challenges of managing complex development and regulatory environments in tribal areas.

The Panchayati Raj (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 (PESA) granted gram sabhas substantial powers over local resources and development planning. In practice, PESA's provisions remain imperfectly implemented across all the relevant states, with gram sabhas routinely bypassed in the approval of mining leases and infrastructure projects. This implementation gap between statutory tribal rights and administrative reality represents the most structurally significant residual grievance in the LWE heartland, and its resolution is arguably the most important prerequisite for sustainable peace.

### **The Legacy and Consolidation Challenge**

The MHA's October 2025 review introduced a category of Legacy and Thrust Districts -- 27 districts that have exited active LWE-affected status but are classified as prospective sites for LWE re-expansion, requiring continued government support for capacity building. This classification reflects a sophisticated understanding that territorial exit from active conflict is not self-reinforcing: districts where governance



remains weak, infrastructure investment is not maintained, and the underlying land and livelihood grievances are not addressed can revert to LWE-affected status relatively quickly if the incentive structures that drove initial mobilisation remain in place.

## **VI. Conclusions and Policy Implications**

This article has argued that the decline of Left-Wing Extremism in India since 2015 represents a genuine and statistically robust achievement -- one of the most significant turnarounds in a major armed insurgency in contemporary Asia -- but that it should be understood as a transition from acute conflict toward a more complex condition of structural vulnerability, rather than as the resolution of the underlying socio-economic and governance problems that gave rise to Naxalism in the first place. The reduction of LWE-affected districts from 126 to seven over a decade is an operational achievement of the first order. The 81 percent reduction in violent incidents and 85 percent reduction in deaths have removed the most immediate obstacle to development delivery in India's most marginalised districts, enabling infrastructure construction, financial inclusion, and social service delivery that the insurgency had systematically prevented.

Three sets of policy implications follow from this analysis. First, the dual-track model of concurrent security and development has been vindicated as a strategic framework: the sequentialist view -- that security must be fully established before development can commence -- is empirically refuted by India's experience, where the interdigitation of security operations and welfare delivery was itself a tool for shifting community allegiances and undermining Maoist legitimacy. The aspirational district framework, which tracks development indicators in 112 districts including most LWE-affected areas, has provided a useful accountability mechanism that should be maintained and strengthened in the legacy and consolidation phase.

Second, the resolution of structural grievances around tribal land and forest rights must be recognised not merely as a social justice imperative but as a core security objective. The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006, and the PESA framework provide the statutory architecture for this resolution, but their administrative implementation requires sustained political will and capacity investment at the state level that has, to date, been inconsistent. Mining-related displacement, if pursued without genuine Free, Prior and Informed Consent from affected tribal communities and adequate rehabilitation, risks reconstituting the conditions for resurgence in areas from which LWE has been cleared at considerable cost.

Third, the international development literature offers a cautionary note against prematurely declaring victory in what remains a structurally fragile environment. The Legacy and Thrust classification that the MHA introduced in October 2025 is a conceptually sound recognition that post-conflict consolidation requires sustained, if differently configured, engagement. Durable peace in India's former Red Corridor will require not simply the defeat of an armed organisation, but the transformation of the relationship between the Indian state and its most marginalised citizens -- tribal communities whose historical encounter with that state has been defined by exclusion,



dispossession, and the subordination of customary rights to the imperatives of industrial development.

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