



Research Paper

Counter-Ideology and Naxalism in Chhattisgarh

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ABSTRACT: This inquiry considers whether Naxalism in Chhattisgarh can be ended through military operations alone, or whether its ideological foundations must also be dismantled. While the insurgency has historically thrived on narratives of dispossession and injustice, recent developments suggest a decisive shift. In 2025, large-scale operations such as Operation Black Forest weakened Maoist strongholds [1], and mass surrenders underscored the declining grip of insurgent ideology [2]. At the same time, rehabilitation and development schemes like Niyad Nella Nar signal a pivot from coercion to legitimacy [3]. Yet, despite these gains, districts such as Bijapur, Sukma, and Narayanpur remain affected [1], reminding us that force alone cannot dismantle ideology.

Drawing on historical analysis of the Naxalite movement and comparative lessons from global insurgencies such as Peru's Shining Path [4] that endorsed Maoism and Colombia's FARC [5] (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia), Marxist guerrilla organization. This study highlights how ideology endures through narratives of resistance against exploitation and injustice. By reframing counterinsurgency as counter-ideology, the analysis offers a roadmap for embedding justice and legitimacy into governance.

KEYWORDS: Counter-ideology, Gramsci's Hegemony, Left Wing Extremism (LWE), Maoism, Naxalism

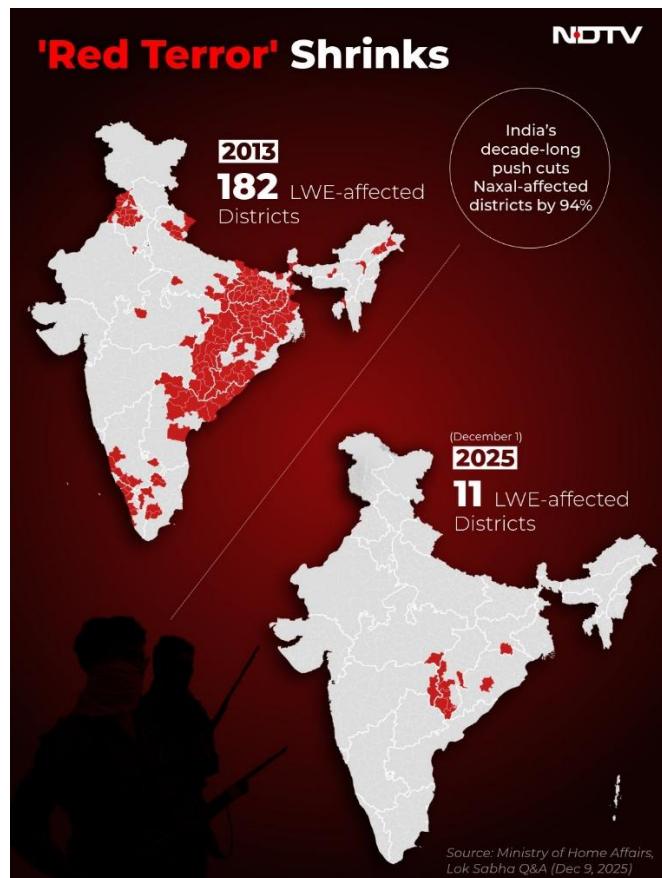
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I. INTRODUCTION

The Naxal insurgency, or Left-Wing Extremism (LWE), has long been described by as the country's "single biggest internal security threat." [6] Originating in Naxalbari, West Bengal in 1967, it spread across the "Red Corridor," with Chhattisgarh emerging as its epicenter after 2000 [7]. Bastar, with its dense forests, mineral wealth, and tribal-majority population, became the symbolic heart of LWE, where grievances over displacement, exploitation of resources, and weak implementation of safeguards such as the Forest Rights Act (FRA) and Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA) sustained insurgent ideology.

Rooted in grievances over displacement, resource exploitation, and exclusion of tribal communities, the insurgency has historically thrived in the Bastar division. Yet, recent developments suggest a decisive shift in the state's trajectory. In 2025, large-scale operations such as *Operation Black Forest* dismantled the Maoists' strongest base in the dense, hilly terrain of Kurragutta along the Chhattisgarh–Telangana border [8]. Civilian fatalities fell from 222 in 2014 to 61 in 2025, and over 3,400 Maoists surrendered nationally between 2023 and 2025 [9] under rehabilitation programs such as *Lon Varratu* ("Return Home") and *Poona Margem* ("Revival through Rehabilitation") [10]. The government has simultaneously advanced rehabilitation and development initiatives, most notably the *Niyad Nella Nar* scheme, which seeks to transform Naxal-affected villages into "good villages" by improving education, connectivity, and welfare for Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs). [11]



Chhattisgarh Chief Minister has declared that Naxalism is on the verge of elimination, crediting the “double-engine government” for combining security operations with grassroots development. [12] Union Home Minister has set March 2026 as the deadline for eradicating LWE nationwide, underscoring the urgency of current campaigns. Despite these gains, districts such as Bijapur, Sukma, and Narayanpur remain affected [1], reminding us that ideology cannot be eradicated by force alone.

This paper situates Chhattisgarh’s experience within both its local context and comparative global cases, asking whether military operations alone can end Naxalism, or whether dismantling its ideological foundations through governance, justice, and cultural legitimacy is essential for durable peace.

II. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research design based on secondary sources, including scholarly works on insurgency, tribal rights, and comparative case studies. Peru’s Shining Path and Colombia’s FARC are examined to situate Chhattisgarh’s Naxal insurgency within a broader global context of ideological movements and counterinsurgency strategies. The approach is interpretive, applying Antonio Gramsci’s theory of hegemony to explore how Maoist ideology endures through narratives of justice, dignity, and resistance, and how counter-hegemonic strategies can dismantle these narratives. By connecting local grievances in Bastar and Dantewada with global lessons on insurgent persistence, the study highlights the ideological dimensions of conflict and legitimacy.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarship on Naxalism in India has consistently emphasized its dual character: as both a **security challenge** and a **crisis of legitimacy**. Nandini Sundar’s work, *The Burning Forest: India’s War in Bastar* (2019) [13], argues how state violence and displacement in Bastar entrenched distrust, framing insurgency as a perceived form of justice for marginalized communities. She argues that state-led campaigns like *Salwa Judum* deepened alienation, reinforcing Maoist claims of dispossession. Ajay Gudavarthy, in *Maoism, Democracy and Globalisation: Cross-Currents in Indian Politics* (2014) [14], similarly highlights how Maoists exploit governance failures, positioning themselves as defenders of tribal rights against state neglect.

Dalbir Ahlawat, in *Terrorism, Security and Development in South Asia: National, Regional and Global Implications* (2021) [15], underscores the importance of addressing structural grievances alongside security measures. He points to a key policy shift in August 2014, when the government amended the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006. This amendment aimed “*to recognize and vest the forest rights and occupation of forest land in forest dwelling Scheduled Tribes and other traditional forest dwellers, who have been residing in such forests for generations, but whose rights could not be recorded*”.

However, Ahlawat cautions that implementation gaps undermined these reforms. “*Despite earnest intentions to introduce this amendment,*” he writes, “*fault lines cropped up in its implementation that, in real terms, were the major root causes of the Naxal insurgency. Even the minister of tribal affairs himself acknowledged the fault lines*”.

Antonio Gramsci’s framework of hegemony provides a useful lens for interpreting these dynamics. As Gramsci observed in *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (1971): [16] “*Ideas and opinions are not spontaneously "born" in each individual brain: they have had a centre of formation, of irradiation, of dissemination, of persuasion—a group of men, or a single individual even, which has developed them and presented them in the political form of current reality.*” Naxal leaders in Bastar function as such “organic intellectuals,” embedding ideology in everyday struggles and positioning themselves as moral arbiters of justice.

Comparative insurgency studies of David Scott Palmer’s *The Shining Path of Peru* (1992) [17] illustrates that insurgencies persist where state legitimacy is weak. Revolutions thrive less on insurgent brilliance than on governmental failure to address economic and social grievances, and even after leadership captures weakened the group, its ideology persisted. Virginia M. Bouvier’s *Colombia: Building Peace in a Time of War* (2009) [18] notes that FARC sought to enter politics in the mid-1980s through the Patriotic Union (UP), which initially achieved electoral success but was soon targeted by systematic political violence. Meanwhile, the government ignored deeper issues of social and economic exclusion, allowing inequality, poverty, and marginalization to persist. This experience led them to put less emphasis on political participation and to believe they needed to maintain their armed struggle.

Together, these works suggest that durable peace in Chhattisgarh requires dismantling Maoism’s ideological hegemony by embedding justice, dignity, and inclusion into governance, rather than relying solely on military operations.

IV. ANALYSIS AND CASE STUDIES

Within the Bastar division, the insurgency reveals two contrasting trajectories: Bastar itself continues to witness Maoist violence, while Dantewada demonstrates how rehabilitation and development initiatives have begun to erode insurgent influence.

4.1 BASTAR: THE ENDURING APPEAL OF MAOIST IDEOLOGY

Bastar has long been the symbolic heart of Maoism in India, where dense forests, mineral wealth, and a tribal-majority population created fertile ground for insurgent narratives. Maoists positioned themselves as defenders of tribal dignity against displacement and weak implementation of safeguards like the FRA and PESA. Scholars note that state-led campaigns such as *Salwa Judum* deepened alienation, reinforcing insurgent claims of dispossession. Even as violence declined nationally, Bastar remains a challenge for the security forces. Recent incidents, such as the killing of a road contractor in December 2025, [19] demonstrate that Maoist violence persists and that insurgent ideology continues to find space in areas where grievances remain unresolved. [20]

Taken together, incidents such as the Bastar contractor killing illustrate how insurgent ideology endured where grievances remain unresolved, while Dantewada illustrates how rehabilitation and development can erode that influence by embedding justice and inclusion into governance.

4.2 DANTEWADA: COUNTER-IDEOLOGY IN PRACTICE

Dantewada presents a contrasting picture, where rehabilitation and development initiatives have begun to erode Maoist influence. Programs such as *Lon Varratu* and *Poona Margem* facilitated large-scale surrenders, with over 2,200 Maoists laying down arms between 2023 and 2025 [21], [22]. These initiatives emphasized dignity and rights rather than charity, integrating livelihood schemes, women's self-help groups, and tribal education into governance. Reports note that cadres surrendered citing 'faith in rehabilitation,' underscoring the strength of competing narratives. Local leadership and participatory forums further reclaimed space once monopolized by Maoists, embedding justice and inclusion into everyday governance.

The contrasting trajectories of Bastar and Dantewada reveal how insurgent ideology persists where grievances remain unresolved but weakens when governance embeds justice and inclusion — a dynamic that can be further illuminated through Gramsci's framework of hegemony.

4.3 GRAMSCI'S LENS

Gramsci's insight that ideas are cultivated through "centres of persuasion" helps explain the persistence of insurgent ideology. In Chhattisgarh, Maoist cadres acted as such centres, transforming grievances into counter-hegemonic narratives. Comparative experiences in Peru and Colombia reveal that insurgent movements endure until states construct credible counter-narratives of legitimacy. Bastar and Dantewada illustrate the dual challenge: ideology endured where grievances remain unresolved but diminishes when governance embeds justice and cultural legitimacy.

While Gramsci's framework helps explain how Maoist cadres in Chhattisgarh embed ideology into everyday struggles, comparative experiences from Peru and Colombia further illustrate how insurgent movements endure until states construct credible counter-narratives of legitimacy.

V. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

The divergence between Bastar and Dantewada underscores a central lesson: ideology persists where grievances remain unaddressed but recedes when credible alternatives rooted in justice and inclusion are offered. Comparative cases reinforce this insight.

In Peru, David Scott Palmer argues that Shining Path's ideology in Peru lived on even after Abimael Guzmán was captured in 1992, because of the strength of its narrative. The success of revolutions is more closely tied to governmental weaknesses than the abilities of those revolting, and the core beliefs often endure even when leaders are gone. Similarly, a 2024 Grey Dynamics report emphasizes how the Peruvian state's support for rural populations to prevent local backing of the group, along with strengthening the police and financial suffocation, all coordinated by the central government, could dismantle the group and its ideology. [23]

In Colombia, Virginia M. Bouvier highlights that the FARC's shift to political involvement happened when peace talks offered realistic paths other than fighting. However, the government overlooked the root causes of social and economic disparity, enabling the continuation of inequality, poverty, and marginalization. Because of this experience, FARC shifted its focus away from political involvement, instead prioritizing the continuation of its armed conflict. Even after demobilization, splinter groups emerged where state presence remained weak, underscoring that ideology endures in spaces of exclusion.

These cases illuminate a critical lesson for Chhattisgarh: insurgencies endure when ideology remains unchallenged, even if military strength declines. The comparative evidence suggests that durable peace requires not only neutralizing armed cadres but also dismantling the cultural and ideological narratives that sustain insurgency. Taken together, these cases indicate that insurgent movements cannot be dismantled through military force alone. In Gramscian terms, insurgents lose their hegemonic position only when the state successfully embeds cultural legitimacy and institutional trust. For Chhattisgarh, this means durable peace depends not merely on security operations and surrenders, but on embedding justice into governance and ensuring tribal voices are heard.

VI. STRATEGIES TO DILUTE MAOIST IDEOLOGY

The persistence of Maoist ideology in Chhattisgarh demonstrates that insurgency cannot be dismantled by military operations alone. Durable peace requires dismantling the cultural and ideological foundations that sustain insurgency. Several strategies emerge from both Indian experience and comparative global cases:

6.1 EDUCATION AND AWARENESS

- Maoist ideology thrives on narratives of exclusion and dispossession. Expanding access to education, particularly in tribal and remote areas, is essential to counter these narratives.
- The Chhattisgarh government's *Niyad Nella Nar* scheme aims to transform Naxal-affected villages into "good villages" by improving schools, hostels, and digital connectivity for tribal children.
- Scholarly analyses of DDR (Disarmament, Demobilisation, Reintegration) programs, including Colombia's FARC reintegration, emphasize that literacy and vocational training were central to shifting former combatants away from insurgent narratives and toward pathways of dignity and employment. [24]

6.2 REHABILITATION AND REINTEGRATION

- Initiatives like *Lon Varratu* (Return Home) and *Poona Margem* (New Path) have provided surrendered cadres with housing, stipends, and vocational training, signaling that reintegration is possible.
- Local officials have noted that persistent outreach efforts, combined with community support, have made reintegration credible. Surrendered cadres themselves acknowledge that life in the forests has become untenable, as police presence extends into remote areas and villagers increasingly withdraw support for insurgents. This shift underscores how rehabilitation programs, backed by grassroots participation, can dismantle insurgent narratives and signal that reintegration is possible and sustainable. [25]
- Global parallels: Comparative lessons suggest that reintegration programs remain delicate: Peru's Shining Path struggled where rehabilitation leaned on coercion, while Colombia's FARC showed partial progress through governance and reconciliation, though challenges of inequality and exclusion continued to surface.

6.3 GOVERNANCE AND DEVELOPMENT

- Maoist ideology exploits governance failures. Strengthening local institutions, ensuring implementation of laws like FRA and PESA, and delivering welfare schemes are crucial.
- The *Niyad Nella Nar* program emphasizes roads, electricity, and healthcare in remote villages, directly addressing the grievances exploited by insurgents.
- Union Home Minister's statement setting March 2026 as the deadline for eliminating LWE underscores the urgency of combining security with governance.

6.4 CULTURAL LEGITIMACY AND JUSTICE

- Maoist ideology resonates because it frames insurgency as a struggle for justice and dignity. Counter-ideology must therefore embed justice into governance.
- Initiatives that respect tribal culture, language, and traditions — such as promoting local festivals, indigenous art, and community leadership — help replace insurgent narratives with inclusive cultural alternatives.
- Gramsci's theory of hegemony reminds us that ideology endures when embedded in everyday life; dismantling Maoist narratives requires embedding legitimacy into cultural practices.

6.5 COMMUNICATION AND NARRATIVE BUILDING

- Insurgents have historically controlled narratives in remote areas by portraying themselves as defenders of tribal rights.
- Counternarratives must highlight successful rehabilitation stories, development gains, and justice delivered through governance.
- Media campaigns, community radio, and grassroots storytelling can help shift perceptions from insurgency framed as “justice” to governance framed as “legitimacy.”

6.6 DERADICALIZATION AND PSYCHOLOGICAL SUPPORT

- Beyond rehabilitation, structured **deradicalization programs** are essential to prevent relapsing into insurgency. These initiatives combine psychological counselling, community reintegration, and narrative replacement, helping surrendered cadres disengage from extremist narratives and beliefs.
- Successful deradicalization requires collaboration between security agencies, social workers, and local tribal leaders to ensure that former cadres feel both supported and monitored.
- Comparative lessons from global counterinsurgency efforts should be studied to ensure that deradicalization is paired with livelihood opportunities and community acceptance.
- In Chhattisgarh, integrating counselling services, peer-mentorship by surrendered cadres, and community forums into existing schemes like *Lon Varratu* and *Poona Margem* can strengthen long-term peace.
- By addressing the psychological and cultural dimensions of insurgency, deradicalization ensures that rehabilitation addresses both material and ideological dimensions, embedding trust and legitimacy into governance.

VII. CONCLUSION

The Maoist insurgency in Chhattisgarh has declined sharply, with violence reduced by nearly 90% since 2010 and thousands of cadres surrendering under rehabilitation programs. [26] Yet ideology continues to endure. Reports point to a leadership crisis within the Maoist ranks [27], yet cadres and ideology continue to persist on the ground, showing that the struggle has not fully ended. Although frequent reports highlight Maoist surrenders, many remain outside the law, and incidents such as the killing of a road contractor in Bastar confirm that violence remains ongoing.

Comparative experiences from Peru and Colombia confirm that insurgent movements endure when grievances remain unresolved. Durable peace in Chhattisgarh will therefore depend not only on ending armed struggle but on dismantling the ideological foundations that sustain it. By reframing counterinsurgency as counter-ideology, this study outlines a roadmap for embedding justice, dignity, and cultural legitimacy into governance, thereby replacing insurgent narratives with credible democratic alternatives.

These findings also open pathways for future research and policy considerations. Future research and policy should therefore move beyond immediate security gains to examine the long-term sustainability of reintegration and deradicalization. This includes assessing how livelihood programs, psychological support, and cultural legitimacy can be institutionalized so that surrendered cadres do not relapse into insurgency. For Chhattisgarh, embedding tribal leadership, community participation, and inclusive governance into the peace process will be critical to ensuring that counter-ideology becomes not just a temporary strategy but a durable foundation for democratic legitimacy.

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