



EDITORIAL

Left-wing extremism in India: Governance, economic inclusion, and the path to resolution

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Introduction

Left-wing extremism (LWE) has long been one of India's most persistent internal security challenges- a conflict that extended beyond the battlefield into the realm of historical injustices, economic marginalization, and governance failures. While intensified security operations have significantly weakened the movement, reducing violence by over 70% since 2010 and shrinking the number of LWE-affected districts from 126 to around 70, its ideological appeal continues to find a voice among the disenfranchised. The persistence of extremist influence signals that force alone cannot extinguish an insurgency deeply rooted in socio-economic distress.

At the core of LWE's persistence lies the alienation of tribal communities, whose dispossession from ancestral lands—often in the name of industrial expansion and mining projects—has eroded trust in the state. Poor infrastructure, digital exclusion, and inadequate healthcare have only reinforced this isolation, leaving these regions disconnected from mainstream development. Economic vulnerability further compounds the crisis, with rural populations trapped in cycles of poverty, deprived of fair market access, and susceptible to extremist recruitment. In many cases, LWE groups have exploited governance deficits, positioning themselves as alternative providers of justice and economic security, thereby challenging the legitimacy of the state itself.

Recognizing that a militarized approach is insufficient, the government (GOI) seeks to dismantle insurgent strongholds while simultaneously addressing the root causes that sustain extremism. Its emphasis on community engagement, economic empowerment, and governance reforms signals a shift from temporary suppression to a long-term strategy for peace and stability, holistic counterinsurgency framework, blending security operations with developmental interventions, financial inclusion, digital governance, infrastructure expansion, and security modernization.

Financial Inclusion and Digital Governance as Counterinsurgency Tools

The *Jan Dhan-Aadhaar-Mobile (JAM) Trinity* has been a game-changer in financial inclusion, integrating over 480 million unbanked Indians into the formal economy. In insurgency-hit districts like Sukma (Chhattisgarh) and Latehar (Jharkhand), Jan Dhan account penetration has reduced reliance on moneylenders and extremist financial networks. The *Aadhaar-linked Direct Benefit Transfers (DBT)* have curbed leakages in welfare schemes and the *PM-KISAN* scheme aims to increase rural incomes, stabilizing rural economies, hence weakening insurgent recruitment lures.

Digital governance has bolstered state legitimacy by improving service delivery and reducing corruption. The *National Mobile Monitoring System* for MGNREGA has enhanced transparency at the work sites and ensured direct wage payments. Similarly, the *Diksha Portal*, implemented across LWE-affected districts, has improved teacher attendance, addressing education deficits that extremists often exploit. Economic reforms have also disrupted insurgents' influence over rural livelihoods. The expansion of *e-NAM* has improved market access for farmers, reducing post-harvest losses and minimizing dependence on exploitative middlemen. Additionally, initiatives like *Farmer Producer Organizations (FPOs)* under PM-KMY have strengthened tribal farmers' bargaining power, particularly

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in forest-based economies such as tendu leaf trade, further weakening extremist financial networks.

Furthermore, the establishment of over 1,200 bank branches, 1,300 ATMs, and nearly 5,000 post offices in conflict-prone districts has reduced reliance on informal financial systems often controlled by extremists.

Reducing Trust Deficit in LWE Areas

Decades of insurgency in Left-Wing extremist-affected regions have been fueled by state neglect and economic isolation. In response, the government has pursued an aggressive development strategy, bridging the gap between remote communities and formal governance.

Road connectivity has been a major focus in countering LWE. Through government initiatives, extensive road networks and bridges have been constructed, linking remote villages to markets, healthcare, and education. Mobile connectivity has also expanded significantly, with the new telecom infrastructure bringing 4G services to previously unconnected areas. These efforts have improved accessibility, facilitated economic opportunities, and strengthened the state's presence in insurgency-affected regions.

Investment in education and skill development has aimed to counter insurgent recruitment. The *Eklavya Model Residential Schools*, now operational in many LWE-affected districts, offer tribal youth access to formal education. Meanwhile, the *ROSHNI initiative under Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Grameen Kaushalya Yojana* has trained rural youth for employment, breaking cycles of economic dependence on insurgent networks. The impact is visible with increased development and the disruption of insurgent funding, increased surrenders, and drastically reduced violence.

The Future of India's LWE Strategy

The battle against left-wing extremism (LWE) is approaching its final chapter, with the Union government setting an ambitious yet resolute deadline: the complete eradication of

Naxalism by March 31, 2026. As highlighted in the Ministry of Home Affairs' 2024 Year-End Review, this commitment marks a turning point in India's long struggle against insurgency. The past decade has witnessed a remarkable decline in LWE violence, with security forces eliminating around 290 insurgents in 2024 alone, including key members, and arresting nearly a thousand operatives. For the first time in four decades, the annual death toll in LWE-affected areas has fallen below 100—a testament to the effectiveness of a comprehensive strategy that blends security operations, developmental initiatives, and governance reforms.

Yet, the fight is far from over. The *Union Home Minister of India* has emphasized that while security forces have weakened the insurgency, the final victory will not come through force alone. The government's strategy now focuses on saturating LWE-affected districts with welfare schemes, strengthening economic rehabilitation for surrendered cadres, and preventing extremist resurgence by addressing the socio-economic vulnerabilities that fuel the insurgency.

The transformation of Bastar—once a Naxal stronghold—into a symbol of development underscores this shift. As initiatives like the *Bastar Olympics* inspire a new generation to aspire beyond violence, and dairy cooperatives provide stable livelihoods, the narratives of conflicts are being rewritten. The government's decision to construct houses in Naxal-affected regions and implement a replicable national surrender policy further highlights its commitment to turning former battlegrounds into hubs of opportunity.

As India marches toward its 2026 deadline to eliminate *Naxalism*, the challenge lies in ensuring that development is not merely an afterthought to security operations, but the foundation of a lasting peace. The ultimate victory will not just be measured in the number of the insurgents being neutralized, but in: the roads built, schools opened, businesses started, and communities empowered. A Naxal-free India, once a distant aspiration, is now a historic opportunity—one that must be realized.