

# Naxal Insurgency in India: Managing Conflict through Empowerment

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**Abstract:** The election of an indigenous (Adivasi) lady as the President of India added a new dynamic to the centuries-old Naxal insurgency in India. Not receiving a fair deal after India's independence, the Naxals adopted Maoist ideology. By 2010 the insurgency engulfed one-third of India and posed a serious security challenge. Since then, the Congress and Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) governments have adopted different strategies to curtail the insurgency, but it still persists. Against this backdrop, this article briefly discusses the historical antecedents; delineates in detail the operational strategies adopted by the Naxals, the counter-insurgency strategies adopted by the Congress and BJP governments; developmental challenges faced by the Adivasis; and suggests recommendations for how the President of India, an Adivasi herself, can be instrumental in containing the Naxal insurgency threats through empowerment.

**Keywords:** Adivasi, empowerment, Naxal insurgency, national security, justice.

## INTRODUCTION

The election of Draupadi Murmu, a female from the *Adivasi* background, as President of India in July 2022 raised hope that the Naxal insurgency could be contained through empowerment (Upadhye, 2022). The genesis of the Naxal insurgency in India goes back to 1967 when landlords killed a landless worker in Naxalbari, a village in West Bengal. The landlords received support from the local police, but the landless workers failed to get help from the government. Hence, they organized themselves at Naxalbari, therefore known as the Naxals, and started violent activities to regain their rights over land and forests, from which they were debarred by the British during the colonial period through the Indian Forest Act of 1878. When the *Adivasis* (people living in forests, tribal people) protested in the aftermath of the Forest Act, the entire community belonging to certain tribes was branded as hereditarily criminal under the Criminal Tribes Act (Verghese, 2016:1623). In addition, feudal landlords were tasked to collect taxes from the *Adivasis* even if they used minimal products from their own (confiscated) lands and forests. The above factors made these tribes attempt around 110 separate revolts between the implementation of the Forest Act and India's independence in 1947 (Parashar, 2019:343-44).

After the Naxal movement gained momentum, the *Adivasis* gave it legitimacy as it supported their centuries-old grievances: identity, rights to land and forest. The *Adivasis* have been resident in forests throughout India since time immemorial. As per the

2011 census, they constituted 8.6% (104.6 million) of the total population of India (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2011). Out of these, around 75% of the *Adivasis* reside in the central Indian states, where the Naxals have a stronghold. In addition to the *Adivasis*, the Naxals got support from the Communist Party of India (CPI). In the absence of any coherent organizational framework, the Naxal movement came under the ideological fold of the CPI and started to fight against the government in a better-organized manner that before long took the form of insurgency. An insurgency, according to Galula, is a "protracted struggle conducted methodically, step by step, in order to attain specific intermediate objectives leading finally to the overthrow of the existing order" (Galula, 2006:2). Since 2004 the Naxal insurgency has been steered by the Communist Party of India (Maoist) (CPIM). By 2009-10 its popularity reached the point of having a stronghold in ten states, turning nearly one-third of India into a "red corridor" (Harris, 2011:310-11).

However, since 2010, with the enhanced counterinsurgency operations that included using kinetic force, introducing constitutional amendments, and initiating several welfare programs, the Naxal insurgency has been contained to a large extent but still persists and has the potential to rejuvenate itself if not handled strategically. Since 2014, the central government has unveiled several developmental projects, controlled corruption, adopted a bottom-up approach, and introduced several new welfare schemes aimed at adopting an inclusive approach and making the *Adivasis* active stakeholders or rather partners in progress. This has shown positive results in containing the insurgency and winning the trust of *Adivasis*. Furthermore, the government adopted the empowerment approach by appointing people of

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*Adivasi* backgrounds to higher political positions such as the minister of tribal affairs and the President of India. This has proved instrumental to a large extent in bridging the trust deficit between the government and the *Adivasis* and in turn, has paved the way for marginalization of the Naxals.

Against this backdrop, this paper aims to discuss the theoretical framework to understand the Naxal insurgency, threats posed by the Naxals to the national security of India, the counterinsurgency measures initiated by the governments, and highlight the specific issues such as the identity crisis the *Adivasis* face and the credibility crises the Naxals struggle. The scope of this article is narrowed down to the government of India's counterinsurgency measures only; the ten insurgency-plagued states, although they have their own counterinsurgency operational plans, mainly rely on the central government for funding, logistics, and security forces deployment.

## **THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS**

Each insurgency has its specific characteristic features (Heuser and Johnson, 2016:1). Therefore, different theories apply in different circumstances. One generic theory that supports the insurgency is the Conflict theory espoused by Karl Marx in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century, that society is in perpetual conflict because of competition for limited resources. According to him, social order is maintained by domination and power rather than by consensus and conformity (McLellan, 2000:101-102). Central tenets of Conflict theory include social inequality, division of resources, and conflict between different socio-economic classes. In the context of the Naxal insurgency, the landlords put all efforts into suppressing the *Adivasis* (proletariat) and denying them their right to land and forests. In contrast, the Naxals (working class) oppose the repression and enforce their right to the soil, whereby a tussled competition prevails. Over a period, the dissipation of the feudal system led the Naxals to target the government as their ardent enemy and continue their fight to replace the government that supported the bourgeoisie.

Teets and Chenoweth support the Motivational approach, which contends that poor governance increases insurgents' motivations to attack or organize (Teets and Chenoweth, 2009:168-9). This approach predicts that insurgents attack corrupt governments out of frustration. Moreover, when the government adopts practices that undermine public confidence in the

state's legitimacy, insurgent groups portend to exploit the mistrust by providing public goods to society to win its sympathy and support. According to the Motivational approach, corruption is directly related to insurgency. Corruption motivates groups to pursue insurgent tactics and encourages the public to support such groups.

Teets and Chenoweth, quoting David Lieb, emphasize the Facilitation theory that corruption does not directly cause insurgency (Teets and Chenoweth, 2009:190). Instead, it indirectly increases the ability of groups to carry out attacks. Corrupt states create opportunities for insurgent organizations because of their inability or unwillingness to enforce the rule of law, which reduces the costs of operating within such territories. Moreover, the presence of corruption allows for the creation of a criminal infrastructure that groups use to fund weapons, transport, and forged documents, thereby strengthening insurgent organizations. According to this theory, the situation created due to corruption facilitates the growth and activities of insurgent organizations. The Facilitation theory argues that corruption and insurgency coexist but that the relationship between the two is indirect rather than direct. The Naxal insurgency will be analyzed in the subsequent sections from the perspective of the above approaches.

## **GENESIS OF NAXALISM IN INDIA**

After independence in 1947, special provisions were incorporated into the Constitution of India to protect *Adivasis'* rights and to empower them. Specifically, the 5th Schedule of the Constitution designated alternative governance mechanisms for Scheduled areas in large parts of India where the interests of the Scheduled Tribes were protected (Ministry of External Affairs, n.d.). However, in reality, limited empowerment and development took place; instead, the demand for forest products and mineral consumption increased, putting pressure on the *Adivasis* to compromise their rights. As a result, they continued to be victims of the exploitative mechanisms enacted by the feudal landlords. This trajectory continued until 1966.

Against this backdrop, the Andhra Letter, a leftist ideological document, made a strong call for revolutionary steps to bring changes in India's then-prevailing feudal system (Lockwood, 2016:10). This Letter exhorted people to initiate a prolonged (people's) war along the lines of the Chinese path professed by its leader Mao Tse-tung who declared that "political power grows out of the barrel of a gun" and violence is

imperative for the overthrow of a political system (Problems of War and Strategy, 1938). The years 1965-1966 witnessed several writings by the communist leader Charu Majumdar, highly influenced by the Maoist ideology. In the wake of a power struggle between the landlords and tenants, the situation became explosive when an *Adivasi* youth procured a judicial order to plow his land in the Naxalbari village of Darjeeling district in West Bengal. This infuriated the local landlords, and in response, their musclemen attacked and killed the *Adivasi* youth in 1967. Consequently, there was retaliation by the *Adivasis*, who started to capture their lands forcefully and gradually started to rebel. The government forces cracked down on this "72 days rebellion", in which a police sub-inspector and nine *Adivasis* were killed (Chakrabarty and Kujur, 2010:42).

This had its impact all over India. Fearing reprisals from the police, the Naxals, who were fighting for their rights on their own, got support from the Communist Party of India. Subsequently, their struggle came within the ideological framework of the communists. However, the military suppressed the Naxal uprising in just 45 days in 1971. Subsequent governments initiated some developmental and welfare programs along with assuring the *Adivasis* of land and forest rights ownership. Still, some of the pronouncements remain unimplemented, which cast doubts among the *Adivasis* about the sincerity of the Indian government. Thus, the loss of government legitimacy worked in favor of the Naxalites, who became a medium of the political expression of the grievance-stricken *Adivasis*.

With the liberalization of the Indian economy in the early 1990s, the government initiated several new welfare schemes, amended labor laws, and assured social security measures to guarantee the 'right to work' and alleviate poverty. However, these initiatives made little headway at the grassroots level. Not getting the expected benefits, bearing the brunt of privatization, the prevalence of corruption, and feeling the pressure of exploitation of the forests and mines, the *Adivasis* became collectively despondent by early 2004. This was a crucial time when the People's War Group, Maoist Communist Centre of India, and Communist Party of India (Marxist Leninist) merged in September 2004 to form the Communist Party of India (Maoist) (CPIM). The Naxals also joined the CPIM. Thus, the above discussion indicates that Conflict, Motivation, and Facilitation approaches fueled the Naxal insurgency in India.

## NATIONAL SECURITY THREATS POSED BY THE NAXALS

The CPIM outlined its ideology in a document, Strategy and Tactics of the Indian Revolution (STIR), a blueprint for its political, organizational, and military actions. Inspired by the revolution steered by Mao in China, STIR emphasized the "seizure of political power through protracted armed struggle...by taking into account the specific characteristics, the special features, and the peculiarities of the Indian situation" (Strategy and Tactics of the Indian Revolution, 2004). A primary objective of this document was to fight imperialism, feudalism, and bureaucratic capitalism in India and provide basic facilities to the local people. This agenda coincided with the grievances of the *Adivasis*, as a result, the CPIM became a natural ally without the *Adivasis* realizing that the CPIM's ideology was based on the precepts of Mao. The STIR underlined three strategic stages: Strategic Defensive, Strategic Stalemate, and Strategic Offensive, with the ultimate goal of overthrowing the government by force.

To further enhance affinity with the *Adivasis*, the Naxals launched a well-orchestrated strategy such as establishing strong cultural and social bonds, sensitizing them about their rights, and communicating in local languages. In addition, to address the *Adivasis'* grievances and to challenge the state's authority, the Naxals made concerted efforts to target government officials, provide monetary assistance to the *Adivasis*, redistribute land, and punish non-adherents to their ideology and police informers. These measures proved instrumental in establishing solidarity with the *Adivasis* and, to some extent, addressing their ongoing demand for the right to land and forests (Sood, 2011:161-2).

In addition, to operationalize the first stage of the STIR (Strategic Defensive), the Naxals started to attack public infrastructure, ambush government officials, and rob weapons from the police stations. The intensity of such attacks heightened by 2006, when they conducted several high-impact attacks specifically targeting security forces and inflicting severe casualties (South Asia Terrorism Portal, 2006). Witnessing parallel governance structures instituted by the Naxals and spread in 194 districts, then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh underlined the situation as "the single biggest internal security challenge ever faced" by India (Behera, 2021:31).

Thus, the government's weak strategic posturing proved advantageous for the Naxals to establish

legitimacy and become saviors of the *Adivasis* against the existing exploitative set-up. This facilitated the expansion of the Naxal's bastion in nine states: Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Odisha, and West Bengal - almost one-third of India- with a cadre base of 40,000 militants and around a million sympathizers. Taking cognizance of the liberalization of the Indian economy, the Naxals adapted fast by shifting their focus from landlords to private businesses and from agriculture to mining and industrial sectors to remain relevant. This move facilitated revenue generation through illicit means like blackmailing, extorting, kidnapping, and taxing. As per the Ministry of Home Affairs, the Naxals killed 8527 people between 2004 and 2021 (Ministry of Home Affairs, n.d.a).

Another significant threat the Naxals posed to national security was creating a governance vacuum and running parallel institutions (Parashar, 2019:346). To begin with, they targeted the police informers as an important counterintelligence strategy. This was carried out in the *Praja* (people's) courts in the presence of *Adivasis* to create fear and dissuade them from passing any intelligence to the security forces. In many villages, the Naxals banned villagers from owning or using mobile phones. Furthermore, they successfully planted sources in the local police to seek information about the police strategies and operations in advance. As a strategic ploy, they attacked the security forces close to the inter-state borders to escape into the adjoining states. This made it difficult, if not impossible, for the security forces to chase and locate them due to the legal intricacies of the jurisdiction of different states. Furthermore, extortion, levies from contractors, poppy cultivation, funds from big corporations, bribes from NGOs, robbery in banks, etc., enabled them to generate over Rs.125 crore annually (approximately US\$152 million) (Prakash, 2015:903). With funding of this level, they procured modern weapons like INSAS, UMGs, AKs, Picca, Sniper rifles, Carbines, SLRs, .303 rifles, mortar launchers, revolvers, pistols, etc., from international weapons markets. Porous borders with Bangladesh, Myanmar, and Nepal facilitated the smuggling of weapon consignments without much difficulty (Siyech, 2022:449; Rana, 2021). To be more effective, they perpetrated high-impact attacks and developed expertise in improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and rocket launchers.

In the post-2013 period, with increasing pressure from law enforcement agencies and the capturing/killing or surrendering of the leaders and

cadres, the Naxals exhorted for low-end IED technology. Between 2013 and 2023, they perpetrated 270 IED attacks that killed 212 and injured 371 civilian and security forces personnel (South Asia Terrorism Portal, n.d.a). Overall, "60 percent of the casualties among the security forces [were]...caused by explosives or IEDs", mainly to minimize their own casualties (Mukherjee, 2019; Zohar, 2016:435). The intermittent high-impact attacks on the security forces were sufficient to demonstrate the Naxals' wherewithal to strike at their will (Nayak, 2019).

## **GOVERNMENT STRATEGIES TO COUNTER THE NAXAL INSURGENCY**

Naxalism is an offshoot of deep discontentment and frustration among the *Adivasis* following the apathy of the government and its agencies in implementing different policy programs, denying basic constitutional rights, and subtracting their livelihood means without providing realistic alternatives. The governments in New Delhi have adopted principally two approaches to contain Naxalism, the Realist approach, in which the state considered itself all-powerful and took extreme measures when faced with a threat to national integrity. In this case, the government used its full-fledged force through police and security agencies to contain the threat. The governments also adopted a second developmental approach, wherein they believed insurgency was an offshoot of underdevelopment and thus made development mandatory to reduce violence and ensure security. Hence, the governments introduced various developmental programs to attract the *Adivasis* and isolate the Naxals.

## **POLICY POSTURES INITIATED BY THE CONGRESS (UNITED PROGRESSIVE ALLIANCE) GOVERNMENT**

After independence in 1947, the Congress government, to assuage the grievances of the *Adivasis*, incorporated them into Schedules Five and Six of the Constitution as Schedule Tribes without introducing major changes in the Forest Law framed by the British for their colonial interests (Ministry of External Affairs, n.d.). Consequently, the government failed to assuage the elongating grievances and branded several *Adivasi* organizations that demanded their identity, land, and forest rights as a "Maoist" conspiracy (Ahlawat, 2018:255). The leadership of these organizations faced several challenges to survive as they were either co-opted, discredited, harassed, or even eliminated. During the first two decades, the government mainly limited itself to a knee-jerk reactionary policy. However,

1967 proved a benchmark year when the *Adivasis* resorted to violence and also came into the ideological fold of the communist parties due to the non-receiving of their land and forest rights. In response, the government, following an abstruse approach neutralized the movement in 1971 without redressing the underlying issues (Ahlawat, 2018:255).

Even in the post-1971 period, rather than empowering the *Adivasis* through constitutional means, developing a culture of 'proactive' measures, initiating adequate preventive steps to contain further marginalization, and following up the communist ideology, the government continued to follow a reactionary approach. A rationale to justify the government's inefficacy could be that it lacked adequate infrastructures such as a strong intelligence network, modern technologies, expertise, and most importantly, accountability amongst its stakeholders. With a weak infrastructure and lack of vision for the future, the government failed to (or was unwilling to) understand the graveness of the situation and believed that the mighty power of the state, along with the developmental programs, would succeed in suppressing the insurgency. The declaration of several developmental schemes undoubtedly generated hope among the *Adivasis*, however, the implementation of these schemes got quagmired in maladministration, corruption, and further exploitation of the forests and natural resources (Scanlon, 2018:343-44). These governmental initiatives, on the contrary, proved counterproductive, and swayed *Adivasis* away from the government and more towards the path of resentment. This emboldened the Naxals and motivated them to carry out several high-impact attacks on the security forces.

Taking cognizance of the evolving grave situation since 2004, the government enacted the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act in 2006, to address the key root cause of the insurgency (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2006). This Act granted legal recognition to the rights of traditional forest-dwelling communities over their traditional land. In addition, to meet the increasing demand for forest products and natural resources and to woo the *Adivasis* away from the Naxalites, the government launched several welfare schemes. However, following the previous trajectory, the welfare schemes fell short of their scope mainly because of mismanagement, rampant corruption, and overlapping objectives. The funding of these schemes vanished into the "bottomless pit" and even benefitted the Naxals, as

they got financial support and employment in these schemes (Routray, 2017:58). Moreover, notwithstanding the Act's enactment, it was left to the *Adivasis* to prove their claims. In the absence of necessary evidence to prove claims, the Act proved of limited utility to the *Adivasis*. Two visible outcomes of these schemes appeared: the *Adivasis* got further marginalized as they were forced to be displaced from their usual habitat to give way for developmental projects. Two, more emphasis was put on the welfare schemes and exploitation of resources rather than on infrastructure development and making the *Adivasis* partners in progress.

Furthermore, exploiting the federal political structure, some states governed by the opposition political parties pursued different objectives and counterinsurgency strategies than the central government. At times, these parties expressed solidarity with the cause of the Naxals to gain electoral benefits (Ahlawat, 2021:87). For example, Jharkhand Mukti Morcha won the election with the support of the Naxals in 2009. Congress party leader Ajit Jogi "often fiddled with Maoists for electoral gains and other benefits", similarly, in West Bengal, Mamata Banerjee "built a tacit understanding with underground Maoists" in 2011, in Orissa, Biju Patnaik went to the extent of claiming, "he himself was a Naxalite" (Sahoo, 2019:14).

Witnessing the Naxal's hold on one-third of India, running of parallel institutions, attacking governmental infrastructure, and deepening legitimacy with the *Adivasis*, the government included the CPIM in the Schedule of Terrorist Organizations in June 2009, along with all its formations and front organizations under the existing Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967 (Ministry of Home Affairs, n.d.b). To enforce the Act, the government changed its tack from winning hearts and minds to an enemy-centric approach, that is, ordering all-out joint operations by the central armed police and state police forces to eliminate Naxal leaders/operatives in the Naxal-affected areas of Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Jharkhand, and Chhattisgarh (Ahlawat and Ahlawat, 2019:104). These were short-duration operations, called Green Hunt, Police Week, etc., wherein surprise raids were carried out simultaneously at different places. The main targets of these raids were village-level bodies, established by the Naxals in their areas of control and no-go zones - their hideout places. These and many other operations successfully suppressed the Naxal cadres at the grassroots level but had a limited impact on their overall capability. The Naxals demonstrated their might

by ambushing and killing 76 security personnel in a single incident in April 2010 (Ahlawat, 2021:91). This was a big shock and surprise for the government about the lethality of the Naxals.

To contain the occurrence of such incidents in the future, the government initiated an Integrated Action Plan (IAP) in the 60 most insurgency-hit districts in November 2010 (Rawat, 2019:18). The IAP aimed to enhance legitimacy at the grassroots level by effectively implementing provisions of the local government (Extension to the Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996, and the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006.

To scuttle the government efforts and to demonstrate their might to impress the *Adivasis* and their cadres, the Naxals killed ten police personnel in May 2011. This proved an open challenge to the government, which adopted a more intense kinetic approach to weaken the Naxals. By launching several operations, security forces pushed out the Naxals from their stronghold in Saranda Forest (Bagul, 2022:32), destroyed their training camps, captured or killed several senior leaders, and compelled thousands of cadres to surrender. This fractured the backbone of the insurgency by the end of 2012. However, within a few months, the killing of 24 political leaders in an ambush in 2013 proved a critical turning point for the government. To combat the Naxals aggressively, the security forces, through coordinated counterinsurgency operations, put excessive pressure on the key and prized leaders by mapping their mobility, capturing a major weapons-making factory, and draining their revenue sources, among other measures. A positive outcome of these provisions was that several senior leaders were compelled to surrender. This greatly blew the morale of the Naxal leadership and the cadres (Ramana, 2019).

Notwithstanding the above-discussed policy measures and achieving some successes, the Naxal insurgency remained buoyant. In this regard, India's then Home Secretary GK Pillai humbly admitted in 2009 that "the government and its policies were largely to blame for the rise of Naxalism" (Pillai, 2010:2). Notwithstanding this submission, then Home Minister P. Chidambaram claimed in July 2010 that the Centre was confident of overcoming the ultra-Left problem in the next three years through its existing two-pronged policy – development and police action (Singh, 2021). No doubt, the insurgency was noticeably down by

2013, but certainly, it was not out mainly because of a lack of effective governance.

### **POLICY POSTURES INITIATED BY THE BJP (NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC ALLIANCE) GOVERNMENT**

To begin with, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), after forming the government in May 2014, continued most of the Congress government policies. After taking cognizance of the intricate networks and challenges, initiated several new measures. It adopted an "integrated and holistic approach...by simultaneously addressing the areas of security, development and good governance" (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2017:22). To operationalize this approach, the government launched a National Policy and Action Plan emphasizing a "multi-pronged strategy" (Behera, 2021:3).

First and foremost, the government identified 106 districts in the ten states most affected by the Naxal insurgency. Subsequently, it continued the kinetic approach from the previous government, which was more aggressive and, therefore, launched intense operations against the Naxals. To be effective on the ground, the affected states were covered under the Security Related Expenditure (SRE) scheme, which means the Central government reimbursed all the security-related expenditure to the respective states for transportation, communication, force mobility, training, and infrastructure development (Simon, 2022:110-11). Furthermore, to contain the inter-state mobility of the Naxals, emphasized enhanced inter-state coordination with the involvement of the National Investigation Agency (NIA) in investigations and collection of intelligence across the states. The NIA was authorized to visit the crime scenes to collect specific samples and understand the Naxal operational logistics. As against the previous trend of each state's jurisdiction being limited to its territory, the government constituted Joint Task Forces with members from the neighboring states to chart out strategies to contain the Naxals' cross-border movements. This facilitated the launching of synchronized and synergized anti-Naxalite operations. Further, constructing fortified police stations with modern technologies and specially trained personnel proved a deterrence even in the deeply Naxal-infested areas. The installation of mobile towers to detect and constrain mobility and communication of the Naxals, approval to use drones, unmanned aerial vehicles, and helicopters for operational purposes, and reinforcement proved very effective in stymieing mobility,

communication, and supply lines of the Naxals (Ahlawat, 2021:89).

While continuing the Congress government-initiated kinetic force strategy, the BJP government reversed some of the previous government's policies. The Congress government followed a top-down approach to build legitimacy by linking the *Adivasis* with the national mainstream culture by increasing the coverage of the national radio and television programs and naming the developmental infrastructure after the national leaders. On the other hand, the BJP government adopted a bottom-up approach by broadcasting the local cultural and social programs in the national media and naming the new infrastructure projects after the imminent local persons. Moreover, to overcome the legitimacy deficit between the *Adivasis* and the security forces, the government deputed the Central Armed Police Forces to participate in community and welfare activities along with the civilians to project a humane face of the security forces (Sahoo, 2019:27).

Furthermore, to salvage the grievances of the *Adivasis*, the government amended the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006, in August 2014. The amendments were 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" (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2014). This initiative proved a benchmark in empowering the *Adivasis* as the deprivation of land and forest had forced them to join the Naxals and support their ideology. To overcome the previous pitfalls in implementing the Forest Rights Act, an *Adivasi* was appointed to head the Ministry of Tribal Affairs. Furthermore, to empower the *Adivasis* and ensure their food security, and protect their rights on the forest land, title deed distribution provisions were initiated that have progressed incrementally from 14,01,004 in 2016-17; 14,63,855 in 2017-18; to 15,43,656 in 2018-19 (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2020:14) adding to 18,54,823 title deeds in 2022-23 (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2023:12).

The government led a massive campaign to motivate the Naxal leadership and cadres to shun violence and join the mainstream to live a respectful life. For this, the government introduced several changes in the Surrender-cum-Rehabilitation Scheme, such as offering to deposit an amount of Rs.1.5 lakh (US\$2000) in bank accounts that can be encashed

after three years of good behavior. Provided vocational training with a monthly stipend of Rs.2000 (US\$30) for two years after the surrender, and also introduced open jail provision, i.e., to live with family but regularly report to the local police station. These measures proved quite successful in wooing the insurgency-fatigued cadres and leaders; compared to 2013, there was an increase of 411% in surrenders in 2016-17, and this trend continues (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2017:4).

Notwithstanding the initial positive results, the Naxals killed eleven paramilitary commandos and 25 CRPF personnel in 2017. This forced the government to initiate new measures as then Home Minister Rajnath Singh called for a "review of the national anti-Naxalite strategy" (Puri, 2019:154-5). To meet the challenge, he introduced a new doctrine called SAMADHAN in 2017. Each alphabet of this acronym stands for different strategies to be carried out, S stands for (Smart leadership), A (Aggressive strategy), M (Motivation and training), A (Actionable intelligence), D [Dashboard based KPIs (key performance indicators) and KRAs (key result areas)], H (Harnessing technology), A (Action plan for each theatre), N (No access to financing) (Ray, 2022:1403). The initial success of this doctrine was evinced when the security forces killed 37 Naxals in two coordinated operations in April 2018.

To rein in the rampant corruption and checkmate the illegal revenue sources, the government demonetized Rs1000 and Rs500 denomination currency in 2016. Although the government and some authors claim complete success of the demonetization and check on corruption (Press Information Bureau, 2018, Chiarotti and Monnet, 2019:3), the Naxals successfully exchanged small amounts through the *Adivasis* and contractors working in the forest areas. Overall, the claims that the demonetization "hit the backbone of Naxalism" proved partially true (Sahasrabudde, 2018:13). Thus, not finding the demonetization process fully effective, the government initiated another strategy to choke the financial flows of the Naxals. To operationalize this, "multi-disciplinary groups" were formed to track and block the flow of an estimated Rs.1500 crore (approximately US\$182 million) (Sahoo, 2019:4). These groups included officers from different agencies, such as the Intelligence Bureau, NIA, Central Bureau of Investigation, Enforcement Directorate, Directorate of Revenue Intelligence, and the state police. Even this strategy fell short of the expectations as the Naxals had shifted their revenue generation sources to collect

levies from the *Adivasis*, laborers, and tendu leaf workers; protection money from transporters, industrialists; and extortion from road and mining contractors, and stone quarry operators. Whatever the impact on the Naxal revenue generation, the COVID-19 lockdown substantially hampered their revenue generation because of the closure of mining and forest harvesting activities (Rana and Simon, 2020).

Under the purview of SAMADHAN, the government instituted several specialized counterinsurgency and anti-terrorism (CIAT) schools to strengthen its operational capability based on the specific intelligence input and also to enhance advanced level weaponry expertise, de-mining techniques, communication skills, operational tactics, credible intelligence collection, jungle warfare, map reading and suspect identifying. National Intelligence Grid (NATGRID), initiated by the Congress government after the Mumbai attack in 2008, was strengthened by linking it with different government departments and financial sectors to collect specific and hard intelligence (Pillai, 2018:10; Ministry of Home Affairs, 2022:13). That turned into a combined database of 21 separate sub-databases like driving licenses, passport details, bank accounts, income tax, property dealings, foreign travel, etc (Srivastava, 2017). This provided specific information about financial transactions by individuals/ institutions, which could be monitored in case of suspicious dealings. However, as the Naxals collected revenue in cash, this measure also fell short of expectations.

Yet another initiative the government took was to track and control the flow of weapons. In this regard, advanced technological innovations were introduced in 2018 that got activated while using biometrics when buying and selling weapons. To have control and authenticity over the sale and purchase of explosives and ammunition, it was mandated to provide a Unique Identification number. Furthermore, a System for Explosive Tracking and Training Project (SETT) was designed with a cost of Rs.62.45 crores (US\$76 million) for effectively monitoring the flow of explosives right from the manufacturer to the end-user on a real-time basis through the supply chain. It was made mandatory to barcode the weapons and explosives. Each barcode bore the country code, state code, company's license number, machinery number, and series code, which facilitated the investigators to trace the origin and place of sale in case of any irregularity (Singh, 2018). Although the SETT is in its inception stage, its efficacy appears limited as Naxals mostly use

“homemade” (crafted) weapons or weapons snatched from the security forces (Mukherjee, 2023).

The above measures, despite shortcomings, have substantially curtailed the Naxals' legitimacy among the *Adivasis* and their lethal operations. According to Sahoo: “The once-formidable insurgency appears very weak and dispirited...experiencing deep fissures within. Its top leadership is getting thinner every day.... no new recruits in the past decade, and it has lost its hold over many liberated zones” (Sahoo, 2021). This was further reinforced by the then President of India, Ram Nath Kovind, highlighting in his address to the parliament in January 2022: “Due to concerted efforts of my government, the number of Naxal-affected districts in the country has come down from 126 to 70” (PTI, 2022). Similarly, a study carried out by Pandey in 2021 demonstrates that a substantial number of cadres have left Naxalite activities “after being impressed with the government's surrender policy”, which indicates that there are positive results of the government initiatives (PTI, 2021). In sum, “There has been an overall 55% reduction in violent incidents (1,136 to 509) and 63% reduction (397 to 147) in...deaths in 2021 as compared to 2013” (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2022:10).

The above-listed policies and initiatives are at different stages of implementation and execution, as a result, it is quite early to gauge their full efficacy. Notwithstanding the above encouraging statistics and boastful claims by the leadership of containing or suffocating the Naxal leadership and cadres, such claims get regularly dented as the Naxals can recuperate very quickly and incur heavy casualties. For example, they killed 15 commandos of the elite ‘C 60 group’ with an IED in May 2019 while on election duty, and 22 CRPF personnel in another encounter in April 2021 (D'Souza, Bashar, Ramachandran, Basit and Gunasingham, 2022:71). More recently, ten police officials and a driver were assassinated through an IED in Chhattisgarh in April 2023 (Nathanael, 2023). The above strategies reflect that the present BJP government has continued with some of the previous government's policies and introduced new measures to meet the current challenges. However, even though the Naxals have hemorrhaged several of its leaders and cadres, their latent potential to cause damage remains a security threat to India.

### **CREDIBILITY CRISES WITHIN THE NAXALITES**

The Naxal movement had its genesis in the ground realities of exploitation, marginalization, and a state-



supported landlord system. These grievances were very well enshrined in the STIR which outlined three phases: Strategic Defensive, Strategic Stalemate, and Strategic Offensive, with the ultimate aim of overthrowing the government and the exploitative system. After a long struggle, the Naxals are still in the first phase. Whenever they tried to progress to the next phase of Strategic Stalemate, the government launched specific security operations to push them back to Strategic Defensive. Thus, not progressing to a Strategic Stalemate exposed their relevance, ideological efficacy, and strategic miscalculations. Prudently, "the Naxalites have been unable to achieve their ultimate goals; however, their movement has survived and expanded over time" (Staniland, 2018:146). Added to this, the vanishing of the communist movements elsewhere in the world places critical psychological pressure on the Naxals to remain relevant. Their primary objective to keep the narratives of poverty, disparity, and discontentment alive among the *Adivasis* is also fading. In contrast to these optics and ostensibly lofty ideals, the Naxals have done little to ameliorate the condition of the *Adivasis*, whose plight they claim to be fighting against (Rawat, 2019:18).

The Naxals, pioneers of gender equality, degenerated into the sexual exploitation of female cadres over the decades. Surrendered female Naxal cadres have disclosed that they were raped, married forcefully, and molested by senior male leaders. Even if they got married, they were not allowed to get pregnant and give birth, as it would reduce their fighting capability and mobility (Narain, 2017:15). Although they initially joined the Naxal cadres enthusiastically, the *Adivasis* witnessed a reality different from their promises.

The current government's tightening of the noose around financial transactions exposed the senior leadership to their double standards. On the one hand, the leadership associated itself with the poor, downtrodden *Adivasis*; on the other hand, the leadership lived a luxurious life at the cost of lower cadres. Even the Naxal leaders' children and kin studied in expensive private institutions that charged hefty fees. For example, Pradyuman Sharma, a member of the Bihar-Jharkhand special area committee of the CPIM, paid Rs.22 lakhs (US\$27,000) as an admission fee for his niece in a private medical college. Similarly, another member of the CPIM, Sandeep Yadav, gave Rs.15 lakhs (US\$18,000) as an exchange during the demonetization process initiated

by the BJP government in 2016. His daughter and sons studied in reputed private institutions (PTI, 2018).

Since the advent of the BJP government in New Delhi, the physical movement of the Naxals, their communication, funding, and weapon supplies have been substantially throttled. This compelled high-ranking leaders and cadres to surrender and avail the attractive terms of rehabilitation. In addition, new employment opportunities and amendments in the constitution regarding the forest and land rights further marginalized the Naxals and forced them to detract from the outdated Maoist ideology that according to Grice, "Mao neither created nor transformed the character of modern insurgencies" (Grice, 2019:4). The Naxals have degraded themselves to minor issues such as "displacement of tribals", "corporate exploitation", and "human rights violations" by security forces (Pillai, 2010:2). Furthermore, losing command and control, Naxal cadres have been degenerating into criminal activities, money extortion, and bribes from businesses whom they publicly proclaim as enemies of the *Adivasis*. In reality, the Naxals are becoming agents of *Adivasi* exploitation by providing security to industrialists and miners (The European Foundation for South Asian Studies, 2019:12). As succinctly put by Lea-Henry, the Naxals have "become the same embodiment of intolerance, corruption, and uncaring authoritarianism, against which they once claimed to be fighting; an unscrupulous and predatory movement" (Lea-Henry, 2018:31).

In some of the Naxal inhabited regions, strict and relentless actions by the security forces coupled with the implementation of several developmental programs by the government have forced the Naxal cadres to go underground and restrict their operations. This has helped reduce the incidents by the Naxals. The intensity and utility of the developmental programs largely convinced common people to shun the disruptive activities steered by the Naxals and join the mainstream for a better future. In addition, the reduction in official-level corruption has led to more benefits at the grassroots level. This realization, along with the success of the counterinsurgency operations, helped wean away public support and ostracize the Naxals, though in a marginal way (Rawat, 2019:18). Thus, the Naxals are currently passing through a severe identity crisis. Moreover, finding wide disparities between their professed ideologies and ground realities, the cadres are getting disgruntled over the situation, so the Naxals, to remain relevant, are forced to carry out desperate attacks on the security forces

and developmental projects with the increasing use of IEDs.

In some Naxal-affected regions, despite the threat, people witnessing the double standards professed by the Naxals and intending to avail themselves of the employment opportunities offered by the development projects began to oppose the Naxals. For example, the Naxals put up banners to observe 'Martyr's Week' in the Gadchiroli district in Maharashtra to garner local mass support. However, the *Adivasi* youth set the banners ablaze and raised slogans against the Naxals and their "Naxal Week" (Singh, 2018). Such incidents indicate trepidation among the Naxals to arrest their credibility deficit and retain their identity, at least in their previous strongholds.

### **INSURGENCY MANAGEMENT THROUGH EMPOWERMENT PROGRAMS**

Unlike the rest of India, the *Adivasis* have never been colonized or ruled directly by any foreign ruler. Thus, they represent their identity as indigenous inhabitants of India. However, living in forests for centuries and establishing a unique identity of dependency on forests, and living a self-contained life got interrupted when the British disenfranchised them from their lands and forests. After independence, successive governments, despite good intentions to integrate the *Adivasis* into the mainstream, marginalized them and displaced them to develop mega infrastructure projects and exploit forests and minerals. This made them lose their identity, way of life, and rights over land and forest. In the process, the life of *Adivasis*, deeply rooted in nature, worshipping local deities and animals got disrupted. After joining the Naxals and communists, they were further compelled not to believe in their gods and were indoctrinated with the ideas of weapons and power. Thus, they gradually became atheists. Over the decades, they diluted their tribal uniqueness and identified with the Naxalite ideology, which had a vengeance against the government and the democratic system. Their marginalization, absence of development, the prevalence of corruption, and so on, shaped their new identity. Given the conflicting interests, they were caught in the crossfire and were threatened both by the Naxals and the security forces to show loyalty towards them. Rejecting any of these two entities could result in threat, torture, or death (Carrer, 2022:2-3). As a result, they were forced to switch their loyalty very often. In the process, they became victims of indifference and bigotry of the state and intimidation by the Naxals.

However, with the spread of modern education, development, and employment opportunities, the younger generation grew more inclined towards building a professional career and living a peaceful life even by moving out of the region. The growing role of social media and the government's efforts to overcome the legitimacy deficit have all accumulatively resulted in changing the thought process and bringing the people, mostly youth, to some extent into the mainstream, whereby they acquired a modernist and developmental identity. This new identity proves a challenge to the existence of the Naxals' ideology of exploitation, leading to reprisal against such figures by the Naxals (Krishnan, 2023). For example, Pandu Nag, head of Koleng village in Bastar district of Chhattisgarh, was killed by Naxalites in 2015 for supporting developmental work in his village (Biswal, 2020:1). Thus, in the current transitory phase, the common *Adivasis* find themselves alienated, marginalized, and without a specific identity.

Yet another essential factor to note is that the *Adivasis* and even the Naxals are not anti-nationals; the last eight decades have demonstrated that they have not passed any statement or acted against the Indian state; what they have turned against is the Indian establishment. In this regard, Mallojula Koteswara Rao, a Politburo and Central Military Commission member of the CPIM, considered the face of the Naxal movement, stated vociferously in an interview: "If the Taliban attack India, we will stand with the people and rally against the attack" (Prashar, 2019:347: for details on Kashmir see, Ahlawat and Malik, 2019). On a sensitive issue like Kashmir, he took a stance not so indifferent to the government of India that he supported self-determination but with a rider that it should include the Pakistan Occupied Kashmir also (Parashar, 2019:347). Moreover, there is no credible evidence to prove that the Naxals entertained any external agency with vested interests against India's national security or integrity despite their proximity to Maoist ideology. Similarly, except in 1971, successive governments restrained the urge to deploy army, air force, or heavy weapons and avoided large-scale collateral damage against the Naxals. New Delhi has opted to hold state and national elections regularly with the appeal to shun bullets for ballots. This shift is perceptible in a sharp decrease in incidents and deaths from 481 and 1180 in 2010 to 101 and 132 in 2023 (South Asia Terrorism Portal, n.d.b).

Against this backdrop, giving due consideration to the *Adivasis'* loyalty to the motherland, commiserating

with their peace-loving nature, respecting their hereditary bond with the land and forests, reconstructing their mutated identity, and empowering them to disengage from the Naxal ideology, the BJP government took a landmark step, first by appointing Arjun Munda from *Adivasi* background as the minister for tribal affairs in May 2019, and second, by electing Draupadi Murmu as President of India in July 2022. She is the first *Adivasi* person to hold the highest office in India. Murmu herself from the Santal tribe, “the third largest scheduled tribe community in India after the Gonds and Bhils” represents the Santals who vehemently opposed the British through the Santal Hul (revolution) of 1855-56 and also joined the Naxalbari uprising of 1967 under the Santal communist leader Jangal Santal (FP Explainers, 2022). The Naxals have a strong following in the Santals, “where the poor people are often misled and held hostage on the basis of terror” (Upadhye, 2022). Being one among the *Adivasis* and head of the state, Murmu is strategically positioned to understand Naxalism from the perspective of *Adivasis* and as the executive head of the country. Murmu, who previously worked as the governor of Jharkhand state from 2015 to 2021, took several proactive measures to implement programs to uplift the *Adivasis* of the state. Taking cognizance of the ground realities of the *Adivasis*, she “returned amendments to the Chota Nagpur Tenancy Act and Santhal Parganas Tenancy Act, to the State Legislature for reconsideration so that the *Adivasis*’ interests are not compromised” (Bharadwaj, 2022). This enhanced her image and legitimacy among the *Adivasis* as a protector of their rights. A positive outcome witnessed is that since her becoming President in July 2022, the Naxal-related fatalities reduced to nearly half by December 2023 (South Asia Terrorism Portal, n.d.b). In addition, addressing the convocation of the Gondwana University, previously a hotbed of Naxal insurgency, Murmu appreciated the transformative education imparted to the tribal students, and at the same time appealed “not to depend too much on the government, ...they, too, must have a passion to move ahead in life” (Banerjee, 2023).

Although the insurgency is down not out, one of the complex tasks in resolving the insurgency is to bring the Naxals across the table. She has the advantage of using her tribal affinity and her presidential office to convince the Naxals to accept an amenable position in the larger interest of the nation. The Naxal movement being at its lowest ebb with the killing or surrender of its leadership and cadres facing a legitimacy crisis, there

is a golden opportunity that by following the *Adivasi* culture and traditions, she can approach the elders of different tribes through mediators to reach a consensus to resolve the insurgency, as most of the grievances have been addressed through constitutional means. She is in a powerful position to put a compelling case before the *Adivasis* whether they should support her, an *Adivasi* in the country’s highest office who has a genuine intention to address their grievances or the Naxals who have failed to deliver much except the bloodshed over the decades. Notwithstanding the violence perpetrated by the Naxals, popular perception in India towards the *Adivasis* remains that of “our brothers and sisters” and “our children”, and that the Naxal problem is ‘political’ or ‘developmental’ and not a “law and order issue”, this is the time when President Murmu could harness on these perceptions without much opposition from different political parties (Sahni, 2022).

To take the *Adivasis* in confidence, there is a need to recognize their identity more explicitly, assuage their grievances, initiate irreversible measures with clear benchmarks, provide assurance of a fair deal to the Naxals willing to surrender, and incentivize the Naxals to lay down their arms and that they will be tried as per the law of the land and also will be rehabilitated and provided vocational training to start a normal life. Furthermore, the development plans should be executed in consultation with the local people and be given a feeling of partners in progress. For this, the existing Tribes Advisory Councils (TAC) could be reactivated for the welfare and advancement of the *Adivasis* in each state through the state governors accountable to the President. The focus should also be on addressing the remnants of corruption and corrupt practices. The President can offer certain rewards to her community leaders, take them into confidence, and use them as envoys for discussion with Naxal leaders. Thus, in addition to the security-oriented approach, there is a need to adopt an unconventional approach of touch and heal the *Adivasis*; as David Kilcullen puts it, counterinsurgency is a “competition with the insurgent for the right and the ability to win the hearts, minds” (Kilcullen, 2010:29).

## CONCLUSION

The above analysis indicates that the Naxal insurgency can be defined within the broader parameters of the Conflict, Motivational, and Facilitation approaches, as the *Adivasis* are debarred from their land and forests. Failed government policies

and corrupt practices ceded space to the Naxals to become the *Adivasis'* saviors and bring them into communist ideology. They are motivated to fight for their rights that have been continuously encroached upon by landlords, industrialists, and capitalists. The government's inaptness to address the centuries-old grievances facilitates the Naxal insurgency's support base. There is no doubt that the Naxals posed a grave national security threat from 2006 to 2009-10 and even continue to pose a threat at a lowered level. The threat perception will continue to remain so in the near future with variations in intensity. Even though successive governments have adopted different strategies to curtail the Naxal insurgency (Izarali and Ahlawat, 2021:10) the recurrence of incidents indicates that the government and its agencies have not yet achieved substantial operational success in containing the Naxal threat. Much more needs to be done due to Naxalism having entrenched itself as an ideology among the *Adivasis* for various reasons discussed above.

The operationalization of SAMADHAN has provided some tangible results in curbing the Naxal movement. However, taking a cue from the past, the government should continue its sustained efforts and not reduce its security-related expenditure, as the Naxals have a strong trajectory of rejuvenation and perpetrating high-impact attacks. To achieve this target, the government should earnestly implement the amended constitutional provisions, collect accurate and hard intelligence, take strict actions against the individuals who threaten the *Adivasis*, infiltrate into Naxal command and control mechanisms, block funds, and strengthen ties among the affected states. To implement the above measures, there is a dire need for new thinking on the functioning of the governmental machinery and operations of the security agencies. This includes effective implementation of the rehabilitation programs for the surrendering Naxals, proactive dissemination of information about the developmental works undertaken, and moving forward with honest, consistent, predictable, and firm operational strategies to convince the *Adivasis* that the government is on their side. More importantly, President Murmu can facilitate this by playing a dual role of demonstrating an affinity with the *Adivasis*, sending feelers to the community leaders, and keeping her door open for negotiations while serving as the President of India.

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