

The Tribal Connect to Maoist Insurgency in India

The Historical Context and Alleviation Measures by the Government

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Left Wing Extremism (LWE) or Maoism in India has been an ongoing internal security challenge since the late 1960s. The current phase of this insurgency has its ground zero in the forests of Dandakaranya (DK) in general and in the Bastar division of Chhattisgarh in particular. The region forms a part of the resource-rich tribal belt in central-eastern India. Tribals constitute the majority of rank and file of Maoists. The driving force for local tribals to fall prey to Maoism is the sense of deep-rooted alienation that these people suffer from. The article delves into the historical roots of tribal alienation that originated a couple of centuries ago during the colonial era and continues in present times under different manifestations. It is pertinent to possess a thorough background knowledge of tribal alienation so as to be able to evolve policies and programmes towards a long-term resolution of Maoist challenge, which is certainly beyond a security-centric approach. In addition, the article also analyses statutes and government initiatives to include their implementation, challenges and impact towards alleviating tribal alienation. The region of study is pan-India in general and the Bastar division of Chhattisgarh in particular.

Keywords: *Left Wing Extremism, Maoism, Tribal alienation, Forest Rights Act, PESA Act, Mines & Minerals (Development and Regulation) Act*

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INTRODUCTION

Naxal insurgency (now referred to as Maoism), or Left Wing Extremism (LWE) in its present manifestation, broke out in India in the year 1967 in Naxalbari, West Bengal. The insurgency ceased to be a force to reckon with by the mid 1970s. However, the movement has regained momentum since the 1980s and 1990s in several states of India. One of the most crucial variables attributed to the resurgence of Naxalism in the decades of the 1990s and beyond has been the policy of liberalisation and privatisation adopted by the Government of India (GoI).¹

While the trajectory of the movement has been on the decline, it continues to fester. The number of LWE affected districts have reduced from 126 to 90 in April 2018, further to 70 in July 2021 and even further to 38 in April 2024, out of which 12 were the worst affected.² In fact in April 2025, the Union Home Minister of India stated that the number of worst affected districts in the country had reduced from these 12 to six.³ In the year 2010, the insurgency related indices were at peak, and the violent incidents and resultant deaths of civilians and security forces have come down from a high of 2010 by 81 per cent and 85 per cent respectively in 2024. There has also been a sharp decline in LWE affected districts at present, from 126 in 2013.⁴

The geographical influence of Maoism during the first 15 years of this century was predominantly found within the 'red corridor', a region encompassing many of the districts most affected by LWE.⁵ This area has historically been characterised by significant socio-economic disparities, with high levels of poverty, land inequality and exclusion from development contributing to widespread discontent among local populations.⁶ The movement's persistence can be attributed to the Indian government's failure to address the root causes of these disparities, leading to a perception of neglect among the affected communities, which in turn fuelled recruitment and support for Maoist ideologies.⁷ The above factors were aggravated with action of Salwa Judum, which led to a swell in the insurgent cadres by almost 23 times.⁸ The popularity of Maoist ideologies has also been the genius of the Maoist leadership in the sense that Maoists have a history of adapting their strategies to leverage local causes and conditions, particularly in India's red corridor where they emerged to address socio-economic grievances and alienation. This adaptability is evident in their ability to establish parallel governance structures and exploit security and development vacuums created by state withdrawal, using tactics like land conservation work and enforcing

minimum wages to gain local support and to isolate communities from mainstream society.⁹

The red corridor has considerably shrunk in the country. The underlying factors of this are not only the targeted development schemes and sustained counter-insurgency operations, but also internal rifts, ideological rigidity, leadership crises and alienation of the support base, according to security experts and the surrendered members of the outfit.¹⁰ Another factor that has aided in bringing the administration closer to the people at the macro level is the division of erstwhile Bastar into seven districts (Bastar, Dantewada, Bijapur, Narayanpur, Sukma, Kondagaon and Kanker) forming a part of the larger Bastar division.¹¹ A detailed discussion of the mentioned facets are beyond the scope of the article, hence not discussed.

According to the current official data, 38 districts in 10 states are identified by GoI as LWE-affected, with 12 districts as the worst affected. The state of Chhattisgarh accounts for the maximum number.¹² A state-wise breakdown (as in August 2024) is given in the following table:

Table I LWE-affected Districts (State-wise)

State	Number of Districts	Worst Affected (taken up for focussed development)
Andhra Pradesh	1	—
Telangana	2	—
Chhattisgarh	15	7
Jharkhand	5	1
Odisha	7	2
Maharashtra	2	1
Madhya Pradesh	3	1
West Bengal	1	—
Kerala	2	—
Total	38	12

Source: “LWE Affected Districts”, Press Information Bureau, Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, 10 December 2024, available at <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=2042128®=3&lang=2>.

Note: The data is of December 2024; given the dynamic over the year 2025, the figures may vary.

About 90 per cent of the affected districts are accounted for by five to six states and importantly, these states have a high concentration of

Scheduled Tribes (STs) (referred to as tribals or Adivasis interchangeably hereafter), which is much higher than those found in any other state. It is this section of populace with very low Human Development Index¹³ that constitutes the spine of the current phase of Maoist insurgency in the country and is led by a minority non-tribal leadership. The Bastar division in Chhattisgarh, comprising the districts of Bastar, Dantewada, Bijapur, Narayanpur, Sukma, Kondagaon and Kanker, is at the heart of the current phase of insurgency and hence the area of particular focus in the article.¹⁴

The tribals in the regions mentioned above constitute 8–10 per cent of India's population and usually live in highly forested, relatively hilly, rugged terrain.¹⁵ They have customarily held rights and privileges over forest produce for sustenance. However, traditionally these very rights have often brought them into conflict with government and forest department (FD) officials. The Maoists movement has found traction amongst the tribals because the Maoists have platformed their movement on tribal causes like forest rights, contract rates, land rights, etc.

The opening up of our economy because of the 1991 reforms witnessed an increase in investments to mine the mineral-rich tribal belts, bringing about major upheavals. This was primarily because by customary law, the land and forests were seen as belonging to the tribals. In addition to the land, the inhabiting tribes had always had usufructuary rights over the resources.¹⁶ Mining by private and public enterprises, thus became a source of conflict and manifested into a simmering insurgency across a large swath of territory of India.

The central theme of this article is to trace the history of tribal alienation in India, commencing from the colonial times, and to briefly highlight the Constitutional provisions and measures by the government to alleviate the alienation. In order to arrive at a sustainable resolution of the Maoist challenge, nuances in the historical context need to be understood for a balanced and genuine perspective. After all, resolving insurgencies hinge upon the affected community since it is the tribals that contribute to the majority of rank and file of the Maoists.¹⁷

It is argued that the alienation of the tribals with historical roots needs to be understood towards a sustained resolution since the Maoists have merely provided a platform for tribal expressions against the state.

There are references to forest dwellers—to their volatile nature and their mode of production—in ancient and medieval literatures. Different regimes at respective points in time left them with considerable autonomy in the management of their affairs and control of their resources. This later formed

the basis of incorporating similar principles in the Constitution of India,¹⁸ although with varied connotations.

The organisation of tribal communities over a period of time, and the processes therein, have undergone several transformations. In the beginning, they were small farmers on the margins. They were never a surplus producing class that depended on the market or on the governance structures of the society, and instead were self-sufficient with a simpler structure when compared with the mainstream.¹⁹ In a nutshell, these groups of people had a distinctive culture without any notions of private property.

THE TRIBAL IDENTITY AND THE HISTORY OF ALIENATION

While discussing the Gonds of central-east India, Elwin has described them as a great tribe with a rich history of prosperity. Since the Gonds were not organised for wars, the invasions of Maratha rulers in the 18th century led to the collapse of the Gond kingdoms, resulting in the Gonds being driven into the forests. During the British rule, as per Elwin, the Gonds were exploited in every manner with arrival of markets, usurers and vendors aggravating the oppression and poverty, which continues till present times. The spirit of resistance to oppression, over a period of time, dawned organically on the tribes, which resulted in their mobilisation.²⁰

The reservation of forests came as a very serious blow to the tribes, as these measures forbade them to practice their traditional methods of living. The enacted forest laws, permeated the life of the tribesmen, eventually causing distress and eroding their self-confidence. During the years 1933–34, there were 27,000 forest offences registered in the central provinces and Berar.²¹ It is obvious that such a great number of offences would not have occurred unless the forest regulations ran counter to the fundamental needs and sentiments of the tribesmen.

The tradition and pride of the tribals brought them into conflict with the government in two ways. The first was that since ‘they were born from the womb of mother earth, they believed that it was a “wrong” for them to lacerate her breasts with ploughs’, that is, when they were forced towards settled farming by the British. The second was that since they were the true *Pashupatis*, they felt entitled to the freedom of the forests for their hunting. Nothing shows more clearly the evils of an administration ignorant of tribal mythology and indifferent to their customs than the way the government dealt with the tribals on these two points. From 1867 to the end of the century, the tribes were pursued by over-zealous FD officials

'determined to make them stop their axe and hoe cultivation and take to plough'.²²

The economic policies of the British stressed on individual property titles, which gave traction to the land market. These policies deprived the tribal families that fell prey to usurers. Forest laws during the British rule diminished the tribes' access to the fruits of nature and the banning of shifting cultivation adversely affected their livelihoods. The Penal Code and the Forest Act resulted in endless intimidation at the hands of lawyers, middlemen, etc.²³

Elwin, as the head of a government committee, a decade after independence, had reported that the officials in charge of various schemes for tribals lacked in any intimate knowledge of their people and had very little idea of general policies for tribal development.²⁴ After studying 20 blocks spread across the country, the committee concluded that it was the mainstream that was to be blamed for tribal poverty by facilitating commercial economy to make inroads into the tribal way of life. And that the tribals were robbed of their self-confidence, with their freedom taken away by laws that they did not understand.²⁵

EVOLUTION OF FORESTRY: THE BACKGROUND TO RISING DISCONTENT

As per the seventh report of the National Commission for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, few tribal groups practiced hunting and food gathering as their sole occupation. About 51 per cent of them were cultivators, 28 per cent were agricultural labourers and the rest were occupied in the cottage industry, construction jobs, plantations, mining and in other services.²⁶ Their dependence on forests, for a variety of reasons, was substantial.

Agriculture, irrespective of its nature, that is, shifting or settled, was interlinked with forests to a great extent. In essence, 50–80 per cent of the requirements of the Adivasis were provided by the forests.²⁷ Sale of Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFP) was a notable source of revenue. In addition, forests were the abode of tribal gods and spirits, dwelling of animals and hence the leitmotif of their material and spiritual existence.

It is noteworthy that although the rulers and chieftains prior to the British did appropriate parts of the forest for imperial purposes, regulate felling of certain trees, tax few of the forest produce, yet mostly, the forest communities enjoyed relatively free access to forests. The forest communities enjoyed a degree of freedom in the usage and management of the forests and

had developed their own mechanism to regulate forests in their own cultural and religious ways. The tribal ways of forest management continue, though these norms have inevitably broken down in the wake of exploitation and destruction of forests.²⁸

The pivotal watershed in the history of Indian forestry was the building of the railway network undertaken by the British. This was to cater for the requirements of expeditious troop mobilisation felt after the first war of independence in 1857 as also to enable the typical pattern of the trade at that time. The British in the 1850s, while looking at a vast market for British manufactures across wide regions of India, saw in railway construction an embodiment of huge potential for surplus British capital seeking openings overseas.²⁹ The rail and road network linked the ports to India's hinterlands. This pitched the trade balance in favour of the colonial government, all undertaken at Indian cost.³⁰

The years of railway expansion during the British rule saw an unmatched assault on the forests in India, and this was characterised by ruthless felling operations. The continued plundering over a protracted period of time, however, awoke the government to the fact that India's forest resource was not inexhaustible. The relentless expansion of railways and the methods of ruthlessness that the private entities exhibited in destroying the forests made the British government intervene to safeguard their long-term imperial interests. The governor general in 1862 called for the institution of a 'department' to ensure sustained availability of enormous resources.³¹

The result was establishment of the FD in 1864. It was also understood that the onerous task of restraining 'deforestation' and the 'consolidation of forest state' was difficult to realise without the assertion of state's domination *vis-à-vis* forest rights. Having established the FD, there was a requirement towards necessary legislation for an effective functioning of the FD to curtail the unrestrained rights of various stakeholders and users. This paved the way for continuing curtailment of the forest rights of the dwellers—the tribal community—in conflict with the traditional tribal practices and way of life.³²

The first attempt at propounding the monopoly right of the state was by the enactment of the Indian Forest Act, 1865, which was substituted by a much more comprehensive legislation, 13 years later. The 1878 Act ensured that the state could delimit 'valuable' expanse of forests, required particularly for railway purposes, and possess enough flexibility over the residual forested areas to revisit its policy in a periodic manner. Monopoly forest right was instituted by a legislation, which established that the customary use of forest

by the dwellers was not a 'right' but a 'privilege' and that this privilege was to be exercised by the local rulers, the British.³³

Laws concerning the management of forest and forest produce were later consolidated in the Indian Forest Act of 1927, which paved way for the creation of a large area of 'reserved' forests under state control. This restricted the traditional rights of the forest community and threatened their very survival. These communities underwent immense hardships at the hands of FD officials who enforced the restrictions without any measure of empathy, with even a minor breach of regulation treated as an offence punishable by law.³⁴

The forest management policies initiated by the British enhanced the commercial value of the forests, making the forests one of the main sources of revenue for the colonialists. In addition, the ever-increasing requirements for urbanisation, cantonments, railways, the rising commercial value of teak and other forest produce, all added to the commercial value of the forests.³⁵

Due to the harshness of the FD, the forest dwellers who were mainly tribals, were treated as the enemy of forests and the perception continues in some manner even in present times. In this model, there was no room for the engagement of affected communities in the management and usage of forest resources. Scientific arrogance, economic compulsion often tending to corruption and sheer callousness towards the basic needs of the poor have been the working ethos of the FD. Even today, for a tribal his understanding of the government (or *sarkar*) is a FD guard who has policed his everyday life for the past one and a half centuries.³⁶

There were two essential processes through which land and forest under tribal control were brought under state control. First, under the system of administration introduced during the colonial rule, which sustained even post-independence, village ownership of land was not recognised and the records of Adivasi lands were never surveyed. Second, shifting agriculture was not acknowledged as a legitimate agricultural practice, except in Northeast India. The GoI continued with the colonial policy, and as a result lakhs of shifting cultivators could claim no legitimate rights over the forests that had been their own for centuries.³⁷

In the context of non-recognition of traditional rights post the adoption of the Indian Constitution, the tribal dwellers who continued to use forests (for no other option was available) were deemed as 'encroachers'. Also, irrespective of the control by the state, the diminution and devastation of forests went unchecked as a result of the activities of private interests, at times with the FD in cohort. This loss of control over their natural resources

induced a sharp reaction from the tribal population, which has manifested in a variety of means to rise in opposition against the state.³⁸

It is noteworthy that the Maoist cadres started making inroads into the forests of Dandakaranya (DK) in the early 1980s, and forest rights were one of the planks they exploited in order to reach out to the tribal community to build support.³⁹ However, the tribal revolts have very little to do with the Maoists. From the early days of forest administration, there have been rebellions in different tribal areas that centred on forests and concerning issues. These revolts, which attempted to restore the 'golden past' where the tribals roamed freely in their forest habitat, were swiftly crushed by the colonial state. Nevertheless, they recurred throughout the period in almost all tribal areas, where forests have always been the stronghold of social movements against respective governments.⁴⁰

The history of tribal struggle can be seen as originating from alternate notions of property rights. As brought out earlier, a developed notion of private property amongst the tribal communities never existed and relationships were expressed in terms of mutual trust and commitments. Colonial rule, however, was based on the concept of private property that was divergent to the sensibility, familiarity and experience of tribal communities. The state dealt with its subjects individually, in an impersonal manner via the medium of rule of law that was normatively impartial. As a consequence, the individual was now directly under the colonial state, devoid of the community support that acted as cushion, hitherto.⁴¹ The tribals were exposed to the vagaries of market economy, which continually led to marginalisation. In addition, the assertion of state predominance over natural resources dispossessed them of an important means of survival.

As brought out before, there has existed a striking amount of continuity from colonial to post-colonial forest policy. It has been explained that during the pre-independence era, forests resources were vital for colonial interests, while in the post-independence period, commercial and industrial interests have influenced the state policy. Notwithstanding the differing intent, the constant factors towards the implementation of policies hampered the interests of forest communities and their life support systems. Changes in Acts and legislations after independence have been primarily in the form of modifications and additions, rather than being a departure from conventional colonial practice. As per views held by B.D. Sharma, a former administrator and commissioner for scheduled castes and scheduled tribes (1986 to 1991), who worked for the interests of Adivasis, "the independent India has been worse for the Adivasi community".⁴² The communities thus deprived, reacted

via variety of protests—varying from relatively unplanned and spontaneous outbursts to more organised social movements. The Adivasi revolts predate the advent of the Maoists by more than a couple of centuries. Displaced, alienated and deprived, the tribal communities have often taken to armed revolts in the past.⁴³

THE LEGACY: 'LOSS OF LAND AND LIVELIHOOD'

In order to dissuade the tribals from shifting cultivation and to open up a regular source of revenue, the British government forced the tribals to take up land for settled farming on lower rates of assessment. This measure of the British had an adverse economic and psychological impact and became the basis of resentment amongst the tribals. Switching over to settled agriculture brought in doom for small farmers who could not get an encouraging yield, which was attributed to factors like lack of agricultural implements, poor quality of soil, frequent crop failures and rigid revenue demands. These hardships forced farmers (both tribals and non-tribals) to turn to usurers. The feudal trend of increasing indebtedness and the transfer of land from cultivators to moneylenders was pronounced in several parts of India.⁴⁴ Eventually, a powerful class that amassed large amounts of land and wealth through collective activities of trading and money lending emerged. The tribals were reduced to a position of bonded labourers and tenants.⁴⁵ It was the exploiter, colloquially referred as '*diku*' or an outsider, who was targeted during the tribal uprisings in the colonial era.

Minor forest produce during the late 19th century was identified as the property of the state and the people taking resources out of the forests were expected to pay duty on it.⁴⁶ Prior to this, most trade in NTFP had been handled by the local community. The new rules on NTFP affected local economies in several ways. Markets had made inroad into the local economy with slow but steady commercialisation and improvement in communication. The knowledge and gathering activities of the villagers had always been crucial in getting NTFP to the market. This was now utilised in a systematic manner while simultaneously their other traditional forestry practices were denigrated. The new policies in the given context severed the existing links between NTFP collectors and local artisans.⁴⁷ As the volume and range of items demanded increased over the years, the process of local collusion in exploitation through market processes also increased, which witnessed increasing harassment of the locals due to the involvement of petty officials such as forest guards.⁴⁸

A case study of the impact of British policies on the 'tendu leaves economy' (hereafter tendu economy) showcases the way how the colonialists went about exploiting the local economy through exploitation on NTFP of tendu leaves. The British administration organised economic activities in such a way that local tribal communities were marginalised. As mentioned earlier, the tribals were not only forced to pay duty to collect tendu leaves from forests but also faced relocation from their lands as the reserve forest policy expanded after the passing of the Forest Act in 1878.⁴⁹ Furthermore, the economic returns from the sale of tendu leaves were minimal for the tribal collectors, with profits heavily skewed in favour of colonial administration and the market. Based upon the legacy of the colonial administration, in present times, the economy of tendu leaves has evolved with Maoists playing a role in the joint extraction regime.⁵⁰

Tendu leaves being an important NTFP, are considered as being state entity and thus their collection is exclusively controlled by the state FD. The tribal leaves collectors (hereafter collectors) are also mandated by the rules and regulations imposed by the FD.⁵¹ In the areas under Maoist influence, a nexus of traders and Maoists under the official umbrella of the state plays a major role in running the tendu economy. Officially the state government's minor forest produce federation auctions tendu stocks. Traders pay a sale price to the federation. A portion is sent to the state government's field managers for disbursement to the collectors. But in reality, the field managers simply hand the money back to the traders, who deducts an extra wage amount fixed by the Maoists and then send the money for disbursal to the collectors. Given the market value of tendu economy, the Maoist levies run into crores. While profits made by traders and the Maoists remain a secret, the money involved is substantial to keep the nexus thriving; the collectors lie outside this charmed circle of profit, earning mere subsistence wages.⁵²

In a nutshell, starting from the colonial era, the Adivasi although with a low subsistence, yet a relatively independent existence, became completely dependent on the nexus of landlord–moneylender–trader–shopkeeper (*sahukar*) and the Maoist exploitation getting added to the nexus in present times. This exploitation and subjugation not only reduced them to penury, but also adversely affected their self-respect. The alienation from their means of subsistence was almost complete by the end of the 19th century. The tribals as a result, revolted against the local oppressors and administrators, to demand for land, forest rights, lower taxes, lower prices, etc.⁵³

The early decades after independence were marked by intense development planning, as also coinciding with the marginalisation of the

tribal community in the name of exclusivity in their treatment. The economic agenda of nation-building centred on industrialisation and urbanisation and in order to construct the so-called modern temples, lands and forests were thrown open to the market. The over-exploitation of natural resources to satisfy the developmental demands made the tribal belt of east-central India most prized. These sub-regions had nearly 80 per cent of the minerals, 70 per cent of the forests and 90 per cent of the coal mines.⁵⁴

The effect of processes, brought out earlier, on tribal communities was clearly reported by the International Alliance of Indigenous and Tribal Peoples (IAITPTF 1998).⁵⁵ The report mentions: The tribal people carried the burden of economic growth of the nation. The land acquisition, a piece of colonial legislation, used to acquire lands for the Crown, became the main tool in the hands of the new State to take over tribal resources in the name of public interests, and by proxy handover the same or divert its benefits to the advanced and advancing sections, who reaped the gains while tribals paid the cost.

At a time when the tribal situation had reached alarming proportions by 1986–87, B.D. Sharma, Commissioner for Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs), in the 28th Report of Commission for SCs and STs had taken note of the evolving challenge. The report highlighted ‘a simmering discontent in almost the entire middle Indian tribal belt, particularly on the issue of lands and forests’.⁵⁶

The tribal people had lost command and control over their resources with utter disregard of their traditional rights and faced forced displacements in favour of developmental projects of all kinds. The tribal was deemed to be a trespasser in the forests where he had been living for centuries, was sought to be evicted without even been able to air his grievance.⁵⁷ As per E.A.S. Sarma, former Commissioner of Tribal Welfare, ‘land and forest alienation of the tribals and the resultant loss of livelihood, oppression and exploitation, are at the core of tribal militancy’.⁵⁸

ALLEVIATING THE TRIBAL ALIENATION: ROLE OF THE GOVERNMENT

As mentioned earlier, the primary aspect that has sustained the Maoist insurgency over the last more than five decades is that the rebels have always adjusted the character of insurgency by basing it on the local issues of their area of operations. Over the last couple of decades, Bastar has emerged as the ground zero of insurgency;⁵⁹ a region that has more than 70 per cent of the total population as tribals.⁶⁰ In a nutshell, the state is up against the tribal

communities that form the majority of Maoist cadres under a non-tribal leadership. Maoists have been able to raise this huge force because a large section of tribals in Bastar have sided with Maoists.⁶¹

Activist and veteran journalist Shubhranshu Choudhary in his essay 'Echoes from the Forests of South Chhattisgarh' in the e-book, *Maoism in India: A Movement in Decline*, published by The Hindu Group of Publications, quotes the former Deputy Chairman of Madhya Pradesh (MP) Planning Commission Ramchandra Singhdeo: '...the naxal problems of Bengal and Bihar were different. Here (Bastar) it is not an ideological movement. Here we will have to ensure that the tribals are not unhappy with us and do not get pushed to join the Naxals. For that we need to have a different plan for Bastar'.⁶²

Given the historical roots of alienation, the tribal grievances are intimately related to the colonial encounter and neo-colonial state's desire to control forests and forest resources.⁶³ As far as GoI's initiatives to mitigate the tribal alienation is concerned, there are several Constitutional statutes that assure tribal rights and these are complemented by a plethora of initiatives and flagship schemes/ programmes that the government undertakes. These are discussed in brief in the following sub-sections.

CONSTITUTIONAL GUARANTEES AND CHALLENGES IN IMPLEMENTATION

The Provisions of the Panchayats (Extension to the Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 (PESA Act)

Panchayati Raj Institutions were mandated in the Constitution through the 73rd Amendment in 1993—the era when neo-liberalism was in its ascendancy after the opening up of the economy. A distinction was endeavoured with the thought process that the government must confine itself to giving directions and framing policies while empowering communities to self-govern.⁶⁴ Subsequently, a special effort was made to provide tribals living in scheduled areas with opportunities to exercise their right to self-governance through the enactment in 1996 of a special law known as the PESA Act,⁶⁵ bringing in the 73rd Constitutional Amendment to cover the schedule areas.

The passage of PESA Act attempted to shift the balance of power towards the communities by providing with a mechanism for self-protection and self-governance. The Act acknowledged that tribal communities were 'competent' to self-govern and respected the validity of their way of life and value systems.

Challenges in Implementation

However, today, that is, even after almost three decades of enactment, the PESA Act has much to achieve on its promise of securing people's participation via an all-encompassing empowerment of local bodies.⁶⁶ The malfunction of the PESA Act in a way has resulted in an 'alternate mobilisation' under Maoists. This is substantiated in the series of reports the government has commissioned from time to time; one of the most important ones being the Bandhopadhyay Committee Report.⁶⁷ These reports have consistently pointed to the ever-increasing marginalisation of the affected Adivasi communities. Dileep Singh Bhuria, Chairman of the committee that worked on the PESA Act had said, 'the Act could mark the beginning of a new era in the history of tribal people. Having lived since generations in a close and dependent relationship with nature in mostly resource rich areas, they were paying an inordinate and often devastating price, for India's chosen development model'.⁶⁸

Since its inception, the experience of the PESA Act has been tragically strained. The legislative and executive groundwork that the state governments were to undertake, continue to be deficient. The PESA Act envisioned a radical shift in the balance of power—from the state apparatus to the community. It was meant to benefit not only the majority of tribals but was also extended to cover minority non-tribal communities.⁶⁹ The facets highlighted above have been given inadequate attention and the agenda of devolved self-governance remains elusive. Given that the challenges to the tribal community's way of life have severely intensified in the past decades with a liberalising economy, wooing of private capital for industry, the profitable rush for natural resources along with the phenomenon of LWE, the neglect of PESA becomes even more catastrophic.⁷⁰

States have varyingly adopted the PESA Act in an inconsistent manner.⁷¹ In many instances, the states have watered down PESA's power in the phrasing of their respective legislations and the rules governing their execution. Except for Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, most state legislations have given vast powers to the Gram Panchayats (GP) and not to the Gram Sabhas (GS), the basic unit of grassroots governance. This is in contravention of Section 4 (n) of the Act.⁷²

Some State Acts even impede the powers of a Gram Sabha under the PESA Act. For example, Sub-section 10.8 of the Jharkhand 2001 GP Act says that the powers of the Gram Sabha defined in Section 10(1.a), that is, formulating schemes for economic development, and Section 10(5), that is, powers of the Gram Sabha in scheduled areas will not affect the rules and jurisdiction of

the government. Sub-section 10.9 states, 'the state Government by ordinary or by special order will be able to enhance the power of the GS and withdraw them as well'. Provisions are framed to ensure that the government retains effective powers, rather than the GS.⁷³ This renders the operation of the PESA Act on the ground null and void and resultantly, Gram Panchayats and Gram Sabhas merely function as extensions of bureaucracy, rather than as representatives of the people.

The Forest Rights Act (FRA), 2006

The Forest Rights Act, enacted in 2006, aims to recognise and secure the rights of tribal and other traditional forest-dwelling communities over their ancestral lands and resources.⁷⁴ The Act has evolved over a period of time and the latest version was manifestation of a civil society led mass movement. However, the implementation of the FRA has been uneven, and many tribal communities in Chhattisgarh still face challenges in obtaining recognition of their forest rights. Efforts are being made by tribal organisations, civil society groups and the government to address the land alienation problem. These include raising awareness about tribal land rights, strengthening the implementation of the Forest Rights Act, promoting community-based land management systems and facilitating the inclusion of tribal voices in decision-making processes related to land and resource management.⁷⁵

Habitat Rights

As a sub-set of the FRA, 2006, the tribals were granted habitat rights. Habitat rights legally sanction tribal communities living in a particular geographical area, securing their ancestral lands, cultural practices and livelihoods. The challenge in implementation of habitat rights is that the levels of awareness amongst various tribes spread over several states is quite poor. The rights are being granted on case-to-case basis to Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs), which is non-inclusive.⁷⁶

While granting habitat rights to select communities is a crucial first step, the battle for the preservation of PVTG communities is a long one. The younger generations, unlike their forefathers, have a diminished connection to the forest and are less interested in traditional knowledge and livelihood skills such as honey collection, rope-making and basket-weaving. This decline in interest is primarily due to the low income generated from these traditional practices, and it certainly complicates the challenges to assimilate these communities.⁷⁷

Challenges in Implementation

Despite the FRA's aim to recognise the rights of forest dwellers, many key features of the legislation have been undermined by governmental apathy and systemic sabotage. Reports indicate that the rights of a majority of tribal and other traditional forest dwellers continue to be denied, leading to the undesired outcome of increased vulnerability to eviction and restricted access to forests. The Ministry of Tribal Affairs (MoTA) regularly updates monthly reports on the status of FRA implementation, although these have been criticised for not providing timely or comprehensive data.⁷⁸

One significant issue surrounding the FRA is a widespread misunderstanding of its purpose. Many believe that the Act is designed to distribute forest land to tribals at a rate of four hectares per family; however, it is actually intended to recognise lands already under cultivation as of 13 December 2005, rather than grant new titles. This misinterpretation has led to numerous complaints about the implementation process, including arbitrary rejections of claims due to alleged insufficient documentation.⁷⁹ Additionally, a fact-finding committee⁸⁰ has highlighted several concerns such as no timeframe followed for taking decisions on Gram Sabha recommendations, individual forest rights titles given for very small pieces of land, inadequate focus on community rights and other traditional forest dwellers left out of the FRA recognition process.⁸¹

Mining and the Adivasi Community

The tribal tracts of central-eastern India are a rich source of India's precious mineral reserves and this very belt largely coincides with the location of LWE-affected districts. Without going into the details of individual mining projects in the region under reference, which is beyond the scope of the article, it is noted that the diversion of the forestland for mining has not benefitted the local Adivasi communities. It has turned the self-dependent communities into 'dependent, casual and brutalised labour'.⁸² In addition, the ecology of the region with mining projects has got badly affected, harming the habitation and the inhabitants.⁸³

The capitalistic extraction from nature generates significant economic returns on the state and private investment.⁸⁴ The state and the mining companies operating in Bastar earn huge profits from the mining operations by exporting precious mineral resources. Through the Mines and Minerals (Development and Regulation) Amendment Act, 2015, large sums of these profits have been put into the District Mineral Foundations in different districts of Bastar division to improve the socio-economic conditions of

the local communities. However, a field study of Mishra and Deora, as brought out in their paper, reveals that these funds are invested more often in infrastructure development projects than in funding schemes and projects related to livelihoods, healthcare, nutrition and educational development of local Adivasi communities.⁸⁵ The Adivasi communities thus, remain deprived of the benefits of mining operations in Bastar and have instead suffered from displacement and environment-related issues.⁸⁶

The political economy of resource extraction backed by the neo-liberal state policies has led to marginalisation of the local Adivasi communities and fuelled unrest. In a nutshell, the wealth through mining and resource extraction has failed to usher in prosperity into the lives of the local community, and even in terms of employment they end up getting nothing more than a job of security guards or peons at the site of the so-called 'development projects'.⁸⁷

Mines and Minerals (Development and Regulation) Amendment Act of 2015 and Mines and Minerals (Development and Regulation) Amendment Bill, 2023

The Mines and Minerals (Development and Regulation) Amendment Act, 2015, was to represent a significant overhaul in the regulation and development of mineral resources, aligning with the government's broader agenda for resource management and economic growth.⁸⁸ The Act provides a comprehensive framework for mineral exploration and mining, incorporating several key provisions aimed at enhancing operational efficiency and environmental protection. The amendment emphasised the protection of rights and interests of the Adivasis affected by mining activities. It mandates that mining lessees give preference to tribals and individuals displaced by mining operations in employment matters.⁸⁹

Challenges in Implementation

The implementation of the Act has encountered significant challenges that impact its effectiveness in fostering sustainable mining practices and balancing economic growth with environmental protection. Enacted as part of a broader effort to modernise the mining sector, the Act introduced a comprehensive framework for mineral exploration and extraction, emphasising the need for responsible resource management. However, the Act's execution has been marred by administrative inefficiencies, inter-governmental coordination issues and ongoing socio-economic conflicts with local communities. This has undermined its objectives of promoting sustainable development and equitable benefit-sharing.⁹⁰ Additionally, community engagement remains a

contentious issue, with local populations often feeling sidelined in decision-making processes, resulting in social unrest and dissatisfaction with mining operations.⁹¹

Key controversies surrounding the Act include legal disputes over mining lease renewals and compliance requirements, which have drawn scrutiny from stakeholders seeking clarity on their rights under the amended legislation. Critics argue that the Act inadvertently weakens environmental protections and exacerbates existing inequalities within affected communities.⁹² The need for robust regulatory oversight, improved administrative capacity and genuine community participation is crucial for achieving the intended outcomes of the MMDR Act and ensuring sustainable mineral resource development in India.⁹³

In August 2023, the Parliament passed the Mines and Minerals (Development and Regulation) Amendment Bill, 2023,⁹⁴ in a bid to attract private sector investment in the mining explorations. The Bill placed six minerals used in electric vehicle batteries and other energy storage solutions under a list of ‘critical and strategic’ minerals. The exploration and mining of these six minerals, previously classified as atomic minerals, were restricted to government-owned entities. As per critics, through this Bill the government was endeavouring to lure in private players and that the Bill demonstrated that mining by the government was not geared towards national development but was rather appropriated by a select oligarchy of financial conglomerates.⁹⁵ With coming in of private players and given the cruciality of mining minerals for national security, in all probabilities, the ownership of tribal land shall switch to non-tribals in contravention of the Samata judgement of the Supreme Court.⁹⁶ Seen in conjunction with Samata judgement, “the Bill not only buries the ownership rights of tribal communities but facilitates the easy entry of corporates to Fifth Schedule and tribal-dominated mineral-rich areas to plunder the natural resources”.⁹⁷ There is indeed some more ground to be covered on this by the government to convince the tribal population.

GOVERNMENT POLICIES TO MAINSTREAM THE TRIBAL POPULATION AND OUTCOMES

Having seen the major statutes, it is important to analyse the policy initiatives of the government *vis-à-vis* mainstreaming the tribal community. To address the LWE menace in a holistic manner, the government approved a ‘National Policy and Action Plan to address LWE’ in 2015. The policy envisages a multi-pronged strategy involving security related measures, development

interventions, ensuring rights and entitlements of local communities, improvement in governance and public perception management.⁹⁸ As evident from the government policies discussed next, not much emphasis has been given to the laid-down policy sub-sets of ‘ensuring rights and entitlements of local communities’ and ‘improvement in governance’, which impinges upon effective public perception management. The sub-sets flagged have direct bearing on the local tribal community.

It is undeniable that the resolute implementation of several schemes and policies has resulted in the reduction of Maoist incidents by 73 per cent from the high levels of violence incidents in 2010. The deaths of security forces and civilians have reduced by almost 88 per cent from an all-time high of 897 in 2010 to 101 in 2024.⁹⁹ The number of LWE-affected districts has also considerably shrunk, as was brought out earlier.¹⁰⁰ Although over the last couple of years (2024–25), the Maoist footprint is shrinking due to successful operations at tactical levels in Bastar,¹⁰¹ yet for a permanent resolution of the Maoist challenge the issue of tribal alienation requires due redressal. As per the government data in open domain, the government has undertaken several initiatives, few of which are covered below:¹⁰²

- Security Related Expenditure (SRE) Scheme under which the central government reimburses security-related expenditure for LWE-affected districts.¹⁰³
- Special Central Assistance (SCA) for LWE-affected districts; its main objective is to fill the critical gaps in public infrastructure and services that are of emergent nature.¹⁰⁴
- Scheme of Fortified Police Stations has fortified 400 police stations in 10 LWE-affected states and a total of 626 fortified police stations have been constructed in LWE-affected districts.¹⁰⁵
- Civic Action Programme focusses on small-scale welfare projects.
- Road Connectivity Scheme focuses on improving road network and bridges in the LWE-affected regions.
- Telecom connectivity projects to improve mobile connectivity and to extend it to remote areas.¹⁰⁶

As part of its financial inclusion drive, the government has opened 1,007 bank branches and 937 ATMs in worst-affected districts since April 2015. In order to empower the tribal population, the government has also emphasised on skill development and education; 48 Industrial Training Institutes (ITIs) and 61 Skill Development Centres (SDCs) have been made functional in LWE-affected districts.¹⁰⁷

In addition, the government has launched various flagship programmes aimed at fostering economic development, enhancing livelihoods and empowering tribal population. Noteworthy initiatives include the Pradhan Mantri Van Dhan Yojana (PMVDY),¹⁰⁸ which seeks to promote self-help groups and value chains for forest products, and a new industrial policy aimed at transforming Bastar into an economic hub.¹⁰⁹ These efforts are intended to create job opportunities and improve living standards for tribal communities while emphasising women's empowerment and social mobilisation.¹¹⁰

However, these measures have not been without controversy. Critics argue that the current policies prioritise resource extraction over the welfare of indigenous populations. The presence of Maoist insurgencies and grassroots resistance movements, outside the umbrella of Maoists, further complicate the landscape as many tribal groups feel marginalised and unheard in the face of state-led development initiatives.

The government has expanded its outreach in remote areas where governance was more or less absent, and Maoists' writ ran large. As a part of the 'Niyad Nellanar' scheme, security forces camps have been established to extend the benefits of government's welfare schemes to the remotest of areas.¹¹¹ In addition to these camps being a hub for taking welfare schemes to the doorsteps of tribal population, the spin-off benefits are in terms of extending the security forces' footprint and thereby deterring the Maoists to carry out their activities at will. However, the establishment of these camps has not been without opposition. The most high-profile incidence of resistance by the local tribal population *vis-à-vis* the coming up of new camps was at Silger in 2021. The protestors at Silger were from all across the Bastar division who had gathered to express their opposition to the establishment of security camps. Across the seven districts of Bastar division, there have been at least 12 such protests since October last year.¹¹² The government, however, has continued to set up new camps with the focused aim of adding vigour to its anti-Maoist operations with the aim to eradicate Maoism by 31 March 2026.¹¹³

CONCLUSION

Tribal communities constitute the majority of rank and file of the Maoist insurgency in the central-eastern tribal belt of India, which also has the country's richest reserves of forest and mineral resources. The alienation that these communities have suffered has its origin in history. The article has attempted to carry out an in-depth study of the tribal alienation to identify

the roots of this alienation for an effective and long-term policies formulation. An endeavour has also been made to de-link tribal alienation from Maoist insurgency; the argument being that the Maoists have merely exploited tribal grievances for their ulterior motives.

The Maoist pretence of championing the tribal cause is mainly to facilitate their survivability in a terrain favourable to them and to withstand state pressure. It is imperative that policy-makers fully comprehend the background of tribal alienation in the context of history. 'Tribal aspirations' have to be addressed and disassociated from 'Maoist pretensions'. When declarations are made to the effect that Maoism will be eradicated by a specified date, the reflected mindset is that of viewing the challenge from a law-and-order perspective. The focus of counterinsurgency in the realm of security alone is likely to miss the wood for the trees.

The affected community is considered as the centre of gravity in insurgencies and there is no escape from working for its interests by addressing the structural issues. At present, Maoism is indeed on the back foot, but not yet wiped out. There is an ambivalence amongst the tribal population in the Maoist-affected states towards the Maoists,¹¹⁴ which suggests that these rural poor are hungry for peace as also for justice, and blind faith in the Maoists has been on the decline.¹¹⁵

The measures taken by the government to address tribal alienation, such as deeper administrative outreach and inroads into erstwhile Maoist stronghold, have garnered notable attention due to their implications for social justice and economic development. However, despite Constitutional guarantees and numerous initiatives aimed at uplifting the tribal community, the implementation of statutes has often fallen short. It is time to realise that too many lives have been lost already by cyclic violence that merely addresses the symptoms of the challenge.

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