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Naxalism's Endgame – What Operation Megaburu Tells Us About LWE in 2026

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GS2

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MAINS RELEVANCE:

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INTERVIEW ANGLE

“The government has set March 2026 as the deadline to eliminate Left Wing Extremism. Operation Megaburu in Saranda, Jharkhand neutralised 16-17 Maoists. Is the LWE problem near its end? Can security operations alone eliminate Naxalism, or do unresolved structural issues around tribal land rights ensure its persistence?”

WHY IN NEWS

Operation Megaburu in Saranda forest, West Singhbhum, Jharkhand — which neutralised 16–17 CPI(Maoist) cadres including top commander Patiram Manjhi — has been hailed as a landmark in the government’s campaign to eliminate Left Wing Extremism by March 2026. The operation raises a fundamental question: is the Maoist insurgency near its end, and if so, what comes after?

A MOVEMENT IN DECLINE — THE DATA

There is no disputing the numbers: **Left Wing Extremism in India has declined sharply and sustainably over the past 15 years.** LWE-related violence has fallen dramatically from its 2009–2010 peak. The geographic spread has contracted from 106 affected districts at its widest to a fraction of that footprint. The CPI(Maoist) leadership structure has been systematically degraded through operations that have neutralised successive tiers of its central committee and regional commands.

Operation Megaburu fits this pattern. Patiram Manjhi was not merely a battlefield commander — he was a regional node of the organisation’s intelligence and logistics network in the Jharkhand-Odisha-Chhattisgarh tri-junction. His elimination, combined with the deaths of 16–17 cadres, represents genuine organisational degradation, not just a casualty count.

The government’s March 2026 target — declared by the Ministry of Home Affairs — represents a confidence born of this sustained trajectory.

WHY NAXALISM PERSISTED SO LONG — THE STRUCTURAL ANSWER

The standard security-affairs analysis of Naxalism focuses on ideology, organisation, and arms. But Naxalism's persistence for nearly six decades was not primarily about these. It persisted because it **exploited genuine, structural grievances** that the Indian state had failed to address:

Land alienation: Tribal communities across the Red Corridor had their lands transferred — legally or illegally — to non-tribal settlers, forest departments, and mining companies. The Forest Rights Act (2006) was intended to address this but implementation has been patchy.

Forest access rights: Adivasi communities that depended on forests for livelihood found themselves criminalised — collecting wood, grazing cattle, or farming in forest areas became a source of legal jeopardy. Maoists stepped in as informal enforcers of community rights.

Absence of the state: In large areas of Bastar, Saranda, and similar regions, the Indian state was effectively absent for decades in terms of roads, schools, healthcare, and banking. The Maoist “liberated zones” provided informal dispute resolution, protection from non-tribal exploiters, and a sense of political agency — however coercive — that the formal state did not.

This is why pure security responses, however effective tactically, cannot produce a lasting solution unless the structural conditions are simultaneously addressed.

WHAT CHANGED — THE DUAL STRATEGY

India's counter-LWE approach became significantly more effective after 2014 when it explicitly adopted a **dual-track strategy**:

Track 1 — Security: Intelligence-based operations (IBOs) replacing large sweeping operations; CoBRA units with better jungle training; use of technology (drones, satellite imagery, mobile surveillance); better coordination between central forces and state police.

Track 2 — Development: The Aspirational Districts Programme (2018) covered many LWE-affected districts; road connectivity improved (PM Gram Sadak Yojana prioritised forest-area roads); banking correspondents extended financial inclusion; mobile towers installed in previously cut-off areas; Saranda Action Plan and similar targeted packages.

The combination has produced results neither track alone could have delivered. Roads are perhaps the single most important anti-Naxal tool — they enable state presence, market access, and security force mobility simultaneously.

THE UNRESOLVED QUESTIONS

Even as LWE nears its military-security nadir, several structural questions remain unresolved:

Forest Rights Act implementation: Despite the FRA (2006) and the Supreme Court's subsequent rulings, individual and community forest rights have not been fully settled across many erstwhile LWE states. The legal ambiguity around tribal forest land remains a source of grievance.

Mining and displacement: The mineral-rich LWE belt — rich in coal, iron ore, bauxite, and mica — continues to face displacement pressures from industrial projects. When displacement happens without adequate compensation and rehabilitation, the conditions for resentment are recreated.

Rehabilitation of surrendered Maoists: State rehabilitation policies vary in quality and generosity. Former cadres who surrender need genuine livelihood pathways. Without them, the risk of re-recruitment exists.

Ecological balance: Security-driven development in forest areas sometimes conflicts with forest conservation. Balancing tribal rights, ecological protection, and economic development is a governance challenge that will outlast the Maoist movement.

WHAT COMES AFTER LWE?

The question that should now occupy policymakers is: **what fills the space that Naxalism occupied?**

Naxalism occupied a space created by state absence and structural injustice. If that space is not filled by legitimate state institutions — fair courts, functional panchayats, accessible healthcare, genuine implementation of forest and land rights — then the conditions for future conflict persist, even if Naxalism itself is eliminated as an organised force.

Operation Megaburu marks progress. It does not mark conclusion.

The endgame for LWE will not be written at Saranda's tree line. It will be written in the district collector's office when a tribal family's forest rights claim is settled fairly; in the primary health centre that is actually staffed; in the school where a first-generation learner completes Class 10. That is the endgame worth planning for.

UPSC RELEVANCE

CPI(Maoist) declared terrorist under UAPA; Red Corridor 106 districts at peak; CoBRA = Commando Battalion for Resolute Action (CRPF; 10 battalions; raised 2008–09); Saranda Action Plan 2011 (₹73 crore); Forest Rights Act 2006; PESA Act 1996; SAMADHAN strategy (MHA); Aspirational Districts Programme 2018.

*Internal security — causes of Naxalism; dual strategy of security + development; role of Forest Rights Act in tribal welfare; rehabilitation of surrendered cadres; federal coordination in LWE response. **GS-3:** Tribal displacement and mining; land rights; linkage of development and security.*

★ FACTS CORNER — KNOWLEDGEPEDIA

LWE — HISTORICAL AND CURRENT DATA:

Naxalbari uprising: **1967**, West Bengal (Charu Mazumdar, Kanu Sanyal)

CPI(Maoist) formed: **2004** (CPI-ML People's War + MCCI merger)

Designated terrorist organisation under: **UAPA** (Unlawful Activities Prevention Act)

Red Corridor at peak: **106 districts** in 10 states (~2010)

Government March 2026 LWE elimination target

ANTI-LWE TOOLS:

CoBRA: Commando Battalion for Resolute Action; CRPF; 10 battalions; raised 2008–09

SAMADHAN: MHA's comprehensive LWE strategy acronym (Smart leadership, Aggressive strategy, Motivation and training, Actionable intelligence, Dashboard-based KPIs, Harnessing technology, Action plan for each theatre, No access to financing)

IBOs: Intelligence-Based Operations — targeted operations replacing mass cordon-and-search

Aspirational Districts Programme (2018): Focused development in 112 districts, many in LWE zones

KEY LEGISLATION:

UAPA (1967, amended 2008, 2019): Banning organisations, designating terrorists

Forest Rights Act (FRA), 2006: Individual and community rights of tribals in forest areas

PESA Act, 1996: Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act — tribal self-governance

Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006

SARANDA ACTION PLAN:

Launched: **2011** | Budget: **₹73 crore**

Focus: Roads, schools, health sub-centres, electrification, livelihood for Saranda tribals

Saranda forest: **largest sal forest in Asia**, West Singhbhum, Jharkhand

OTHER RELEVANT FACTS:

Bastar region (Chhattisgarh): Historically the most intense Naxal zone; site of major operations

Gadchiroli (Maharashtra): Significant LWE-affected district; Maharashtra Police-led operations

Surrender policy: Most LWE states have surrender and rehabilitation schemes; quality varies

Mining nexus: Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Odisha — rich in coal, iron ore, bauxite, mica; extraction pressures a continued grievance

Dantewada (Chhattisgarh): Site of several major attacks by Maoists; also site of major operations

Sources: Indian Express, The Hindu, PIB

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