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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

After Naxalism: Bihar's Lesson for India's LWE Policy — Development or Deterrence?

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GS2

GS3



The Indian Express

MAINS RELEVANCE:

GS Paper 2

GS Paper 3



INTERVIEW ANGLE

"Bihar has been declared Naxal-free, but Bastar in Chhattisgarh remains a stronghold. What distinguishes these two cases? Does India's anti-LWE strategy prioritise security operations over addressing the root socioeconomic causes?"

WHY IN NEWS

Bihar's declaration as India's first Naxal-free state — after the surrender of the last armed Maoist, Suresh Koda, in Munger district — invites a structural question: was Bihar's success driven by security operations, development, or a combination? And can the same strategy work in Bastar?

INTRODUCTION

Bihar's clearance of all 23 LWE-affected districts is a genuine milestone in India's internal security story. Yet, Naxalism's enduring strength in **Bastar (Chhattisgarh)** — where Maoist attacks continue to kill security personnel in 2026 — reveals that the Bihar success may not be easily replicated.

The distinction matters enormously for India's **₹9,000+ crore annual Counter-LWE expenditure**, the strategic deployment of the CRPF's CoBRA battalions, and — most fundamentally — the lives of tribal communities caught between the state and armed insurgents.

WHY BIHAR SUCCEEDED

1. Political Economy Shifts

Bihar's Naxal movement was historically entangled with **caste violence** — upper-caste landlord militias (Ranvir Sena) and lower-caste insurgent groups fought proxy wars, with Maoists exploiting the conflict. The **social transformation of Bihar under Nitish Kumar** — JDU's development push, caste-neutral

governance rhetoric, and targeted schemes for EBCs (Extremely Backward Classes) — dismantled some of the grievance infrastructure that sustained Naxal recruitment.

Bihar's land reform situation, while imperfect, also improved incrementally. Unlike Chhattisgarh's forest-dependent tribal communities, Bihar's Naxal base was more rooted in agrarian caste conflict — which political change could address.

2. Geographic Disadvantage of Bihar's Terrain

Bihar's flat terrain — the Gangetic plain — offered Maoists limited natural refuge. Compared to Bastar's dense Abujmad forests or Jharkhand's Saranda hill ranges, Bihar's terrain could not sustain a prolonged guerrilla campaign once security forces were deployed effectively.

3. Economic Integration

India's highway expansion under PMGSY (Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana) and NH projects physically integrated Bihar's once-isolated Naxal zones. Mobile connectivity through USOF-funded towers ended information isolation. The demographic dividend of young people accessing markets, jobs, and migration opportunities reduced the supply of recruits to Maoist cadres.

WHY BASTAR REMAINS A CHALLENGE

Bastar (Chhattisgarh) — encompassing districts including **Bijapur, Narayanpur, Sukma, Dantewada, Kondagaon** — is a fundamentally different problem:

1. Deep Tribal-Forest Identity

Bastar's population is overwhelmingly **tribal (Gond, Halba, Bhatra, Maria)**. Their existence is organically linked to the **sal and teak forests** — for food, medicine, spiritual identity, and livelihoods. The state's dual project of forest clearance for mining (iron ore, coal, bauxite) and Maoist eradication is perceived by tribals as the same threat wearing different faces.

The **Forest Rights Act (2006)** — which should have provided community forest rights — has been poorly implemented. In Bastar, individual pattas (land titles) remain contested; gram sabhas that should consent to land diversion are bypassed.

2. Maoist Organisation

The CPI (Maoist) in Bastar is not a remnant of a declining organisation — it is a structured guerrilla force with its own “liberated zones” (janatana sarkar), taxation of mining companies, weapon manufacturing, and political cadre training. Its People's Liberation Guerrilla Army (PLGA) is battle-hardened, has informants embedded in villages, and has demonstrated tactical sophistication (IEDs, ambushes) that has killed hundreds of security personnel in the past decade.

3. Institutional Vacuum

State institutions — panchayats, police, courts, hospitals — are functionally absent or actively distrusted in parts of Bastar. The **Salwa Judum militia** (2005-2011), encouraged by the state to counter Maoists, was declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court in **Nandini Sundar vs. State of Chhattisgarh (2011)**. Its legacy of atrocities against tribals has made state rehabilitation narratives difficult to believe.

THE SAMADHAN STRATEGY'S LIMITS

MHA's SAMADHAN doctrine (2017) is conceptually sound — combining security operations with development. But its implementation reveals structural tensions:

“No access to financing” as a pillar: Effective when applied to Maoist extortion from businesses and contractors. But tribals' economic grievances (displacement, forest produce denial) are not SAMADHAN's strength.

Dashboard-based KPIs: Quantitative metrics (incidents, surrenders, arrests) favour security outcomes over structural change. “Zero incidents in Bihar” is measurable; “tribals economically integrated” is not.

Action Plan per theatre district: Works well in Bihar-type terrain. In Bastar's Abujhmad, which lacks a single road and where survey parties cannot enter, the plan has no delivery mechanism.

WHAT SHOULD INDIA'S LONG-TERM STRATEGY BE?

- 1. Fully implement Forest Rights Act (FRA) 2006:** Individual and community forest rights recognition, allowing tribals to be legitimate resource claimants rather than encroachers. This removes the most potent Maoist narrative.
- 2. Fifth Schedule enforcement:** Tribal Advisory Councils (TACs) must actually meet and have functional veto power over land diversion, as the constitutional design intended.
- 3. Rehabilitation with dignity:** Surrender schemes offer cash and skills training. But tribal surrenderees are often ostracised from both the Maoist network (former comrades) and mainstream society (stigma). Social reintegration requires long-term support.
- 4. Stop using “counter-Naxal” as a category for security excess:** Multiple NHRC findings document unlawful killings, illegal detention, and destruction of property by security forces in LWE operations. These violations are Maoists' best recruitment tools.

CONCLUSION

Bihar's success is real and deserves recognition. But it should not be read as a template for Bastar without acknowledging the structural differences. The reduction of LWE must come from making the Indian state a **more trustworthy institution for tribal citizens** — not merely from reducing the number of armed cadres.

The deeper question, as India declares victory in Bihar, is whether its development machinery can reach the Abujhmad as effectively as its security forces. The answer to that question will determine whether Bastar's resolution comes in 5 years or 25.

UPSC RELEVANCE

*LWE origin — Naxalbari 1967; SAMADHAN doctrine (MHA 2017); Article 355; Fifth Schedule; PESA 1996; Forest Rights Act 2006; Nandini Sundar vs. Chhattisgarh (SC 2011 — Salwa Judum); CoBRA battalions; Suresh Koda (Bihar's last Maoist); Bastar districts. **Mains GS-3:** LWE — causes, SAMADHAN strategy, development vs. security debate, tribal rights. **GS-2:** Constitutional provisions for tribal areas (Fifth Schedule, PESA); Forest Rights Act; Supreme Court and tribal rights; NHRC. **Interview:** “Can India's counter-LWE strategy be called a success when it relies primarily on security operations rather than addressing the tribal land rights that are the root cause of the insurgency?”*

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BIHAR VS. BASTAR — KEY DIFFERENCES:

Bihar: Flat terrain, agrarian-caste conflict, political change possible → cleared

Bastar: Dense forest, deep tribal-forest identity, mining disputes, organised PLGA → ongoing

LWE LEGISLATION / KEY JUDGEMENTS:

Forest Rights Act, 2006: Community and individual forest rights for tribal communities

PESA (1996): Gram sabha powers in Fifth Schedule areas

Article 244 + Fifth Schedule: Tribal Advisory Councils; restrictions on land alienation

Nandini Sundar vs. State of Chhattisgarh (2011): SC declared Salwa Judum unconstitutional

SAMADHAN (MHA, 2017):

S-Smart Leadership, A-Aggressive Strategy, M-Motivation & Training, A-Actionable Intelligence, D-Dashboard KPIs, H-Harnessing Technology, A-Action Plan per district, N-No financing access

SECURITY FORCES IN LWE OPERATIONS:

CoBRA: Commando Battalion for Resolute Action (CRPF) — 10 battalions for LWE

Greyhounds: AP/Telangana state police elite counter-Naxal force

Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF): Primary paramilitary in LWE operations

BIHAR NAXAL-FREE DATA:

Last Maoist: **Suresh Koda**, Munger district

Districts cleared: **23** | 2025 Naxal incidents: **0** | 2025 arrests: **220**

REMAINING LWE STRONGHOLDS:

Bastar region: Bijapur, Narayanpur, Sukma, Dantewada (Chhattisgarh)

Jharkhand-Odisha-Maharashtra tri-junction

OTHER RELEVANT FACTS:

Red Corridor: Once stretched from Nepal border to AP — now contracted to ~12 most-affected districts

Salwa Judum: State-sponsored militia (2005-2011); declared unconstitutional by SC

Abujhmad: Remote forested area in Narayanpur, Chhattisgarh — Maoist core zone; no road access

Maoist cadre strength estimate: ~1,200 active (2025) vs. ~10,000 at peak (2009)

IAP (Integrated Action Plan): Rs. 30 crore/year for development in LWE-affected districts

Sources: Indian Express, GKToday

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