

The Decline of Left-Wing Extremism in India after 2001: Trends, Causes and Continuing Challenges

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Abstract—Since the early 2000s India has witnessed a long-term decline in the intensity and geographic spread of Left-Wing Extremism (LWE) — most commonly associated with Naxalite/Maoist groups — though the phenomenon has not disappeared. This paper surveys the empirical trend since 2001, assesses the main drivers of decline (security operations, targeted policing and intelligence units, surrender/rehabilitation and socio-economic interventions), and highlights persistent vulnerabilities and policy lessons. The analysis draws on official Ministry of Home Affairs material, specialised monitoring by conflict-research organisations, court rulings and contemporary reporting to provide an evidence-based account for scholars and policy-makers.

Index Terms—Left-Wing Extremism (LWE) Naxalite Movement, Maoist Insurgency, Internal Security, Counterinsurgency Operations, Greyhounds (Andhra Pradesh Model), Intelligence-Led Policing, Surrender and Rehabilitation Policy, Developmental Interventions, Red Corridor, Tribal Governance, Security Forces Modernisation, District-Level Governance, Salwa Judum Judgment, Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA), Conflict Resolution in India

I. INTRODUCTION

Left-Wing Extremism (LWE) emerged in India in the late 1960s and expanded significantly in the 1990s and 2000s, becoming a major internal-security and development challenge along the so-called “Red Corridor.” After a peak of violent incidents and broad territorial influence in the 2000s, multiple indicators — incidents, fatalities and the number of affected districts — show a steady contraction of LWE after the first decade of this century. Understanding why this contraction occurred is important for designing sustainable post-conflict governance in affected regions.

Empirical trend since 2001

Quantitative tracking by government agencies and specialised monitors demonstrates a clear downward trajectory in both violence and geographic spread since the late 2000s and accelerating in the 2010s and early 2020s. Independent monitoring by the South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP) and official Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) reporting point to sustained reductions in civilian, security-force and cadre fatalities, and a shrinking number of “most affected” districts over the last decade. For example, SATP’s 2023 assessment reports that fatalities and many parameters of violence in 2022 were the lowest since 2000, and that civilian and Naxalite fatalities have declined continuously since 2019. Official MHA reporting and press releases similarly highlight large falls in incidents, arrests and surrenders that have contributed to a markedly improved security environment in recent years. South Asia Terrorism Portal+1

Measured geographically, the number of districts identified as LWE-affected fell from well over a hundred at the insurgency’s height to a much smaller cluster concentrated in parts of central India (Dandakaranya) and the Jharkhand-Bihar-West Bengal border by the mid-2020s. Several states — notably Andhra Pradesh (and later Telangana after bifurcation) — moved from being major hotspots to near-elimination of active insurgency through the 2010s. Wikipedia+1

Why the decline? A multi-causal explanation

The decline cannot be ascribed to a single policy or event. Rather, several mutually reinforcing processes reduced the operational capacity of LWE groups, undermined their local support bases, and increased the costs of violent activity.

1. Improved security operations and intelligence-led policing

From the late 1990s onward states with severe LWE problems invested in professional, mobile counter-insurgency units and better intelligence capabilities. The Andhra Pradesh “Greyhounds” — an elite, jungle-warfare police force — is widely credited with reversing the Maoist threat in that state through precision operations, intelligence collection and guerrilla-style tactics adapted to the terrain. The Greyhounds model, and related units elsewhere, increased the risks to LWE cadres and eroded their freedom of movement and supply. Central forces and state police also improved coordination and acquired better equipment and training over time. Wikipedia+1

2. Targeting of leadership and cadre attrition

Targeted operations and arrests resulted in the neutralisation — through capture or killing — of key LWE leaders, disrupting command networks and hampering recruitment and logistics. Parallely, sustained attrition and battlefield losses made long-term armed struggle less attractive and feasible for many rank-and-file cadres. Official statements in recent years point to continuing neutralisations and arrests as contributing to the weakening of organised LWE capacity. Press Information Bureau+1

3. Surrender, rehabilitation and reintegration policies

Central and state governments have long recognised that security action must be complemented by incentives for cadres to lay down arms. Surrender-cum-rehabilitation policies — updated periodically — provide financial incentives, vocational training and job support for surrenderees. While implementation quality has varied across states, the cumulative number of surrenders and rehabilitations has been significant enough to matter to the overall trend, reducing cadre strength and signaling alternative life paths for low-level militants. Ministry of Home Affairs+1

4. Developmental and governance interventions

A core grievance exploited by LWE groups has been poor access to land rights, basic services and justice in remote tribal and forested areas. From the mid-2000s governments emphasised a “hearts and minds” component — building roads, police modernisation, fortified police stations, electrification and targeted welfare delivery. Special central assistance, district-level development schemes and community-policing measures were rolled out to restore the state’s presence and address grievances that fuelled recruitment.

Official MHA and central government documents underscore infrastructure and welfare investments in LWE districts as a key component of the strategy. Literal Translation+1

5. Legal-institutional constraints on problematic counter-measures

The State’s response has not always been uncontroversial. The use of civilian militia groups such as the Salwa Judum in Chhattisgarh (mid-2000s) drew severe criticism for human-rights violations and prompted a landmark Supreme Court ruling in 2011 that declared such mobilisations unlawful and ordered disbandment. That judicial check reoriented counter-insurgency practices toward formally constituted security forces and underlined the need for operations that respect constitutional and human rights norms. The legal and normative environment shaped both practice and public legitimacy of counter-measures. Sci API

II. STATE VARIATIONS: POCKETS OF SUCCESS AND REMAINING CORES

The decline has been uneven. Andhra Pradesh and Telangana represent clear success stories: their specialised units, improved governance and effective policing dramatically reduced violence to negligible levels by the 2010s. Other states — Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Odisha, Maharashtra and Bihar — experienced mixed results depending on local governance, terrain, and historical factors. Whereas some districts transitioned rapidly to development-led stabilisation, others remained tough operating environments for security forces because of dense forests, porous borders and social grievances. SATP and government district-level data thus show a contracting but still concentrated problem: fewer districts account for most remaining incidents. The Indian Express+1

Limits of the decline and the risk of relapse

Decline in violence and area of control is real, but important caveats remain.

1. Structural grievances persist. Land rights disputes, poor implementation of forest rights, weak public services and grievance redressal continue to produce fertile ground for insurgent narratives in some pockets. Development

initiatives must sustain pace and quality to prevent re-mobilisation.

2. Selective enforcement and accountability. Heavy-handed tactics and human-rights complaints, if unchecked, can alienate local populations and feed insurgent propaganda. The Salwa Judum episode shows how community protection measures that violate rights can backfire and undermine legitimacy. Sci API
3. Criminalisation and fragmentation risk. As organised political-military structures weaken, elements may fragment into localised criminal networks or converge with other illicit economies (timber, minerals), complicating law-and-order responses.
4. External shocks. Economic downturns, delayed welfare transfers, or political polarisation can erode fragile gains and create opportunities for revival.

Policy lessons

Several policy implications emerge for sustaining the decline and consolidating peace.

- Maintain a dual approach: security operations must be intelligence-led, proportionate and paired with sustained, well-monitored socio-economic programmes. Evidence indicates that where this balance was achieved (e.g., Andhra Pradesh) results were durable. The Indian Express
- Strengthen local governance: empowering panchayats, bolstering frontline service delivery and fast-tracking land and forest rights reduces grievance space.
- Improve surrender and reintegration design: incentives, skill development and transparent screening reduce recidivism and improve long-term reintegration.
- Institutional accountability: ensuring human-rights compliance and judicial oversight prevents abuses that can reignite local support for insurgents; the Supreme Court’s Salwa Judum judgment remains a cautionary reference. Sci API
- Monitor and adapt: continuous monitoring of incidents, social indicators and economic inclusion metrics allows policy re-calibration; public data from MHA and independent trackers (e.g., SATP) are useful for evidence-based policy. Literal Translation+1

III. CONCLUSION

The decline of Left-Wing Extremism in India after 2001 is a genuine and important trend, driven by a mixture of improved security operations, leadership attrition, surrender/rehabilitation schemes and developmental outreach. Yet the phenomenon has not been eradicated, and gains are fragile where underlying structural grievances and governance deficits persist. Consolidating the decline requires a continued emphasis on accountable security measures, durable socio-economic inclusion, and institutional mechanisms that address the root causes of marginalisation in affected regions. For scholars and policymakers, India’s experience underscores that effective conflict resolution needs a long-term, multi-pronged strategy that combines coercive, legal and developmental tools — implemented with sensitivity to rights and local realities.

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