

# MAOIST REBELLION: POLICY FADE-OUT, POLICY FADE-IN

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The central govt and its cohorts would do well to focus on the pressing Maoist issues

With surging protests against the Citizenship (Amendment) Act 2019 and the National Register of Citizens, and the government's knee-jerk approach to dealing with democratic queries of its own citizens, it may appear that the Maoist rebellion is no longer considered by the government to be India's greatest internal security threat.

2020 will mirror the previous year's approach of attrition, and steadfast avoidance of peace talks with Maoist rebels—which is strange when much is made of peace talks with rebels in Northeast India.

Maoist rebellion-affected states—in 2019, officially designated as 11, with 90 affected districts—will largely be left to their own devices to combat and contain Maoist rebels.

In part, this is because policing and maintaining law and order are matters devolved to states. In the ministry of home affairs' (MHA) own words, the Maoist rebellion is dealt with "primarily by capacity building of the state governments, both in areas of security and development". As in the past dozen years, this will continue with better police training, better intelligence gathering, reinforcing police stations in conflict zones, and recruiting locals into auxiliary forces.

And, as before, MHA will continue to provide as additional hammers, the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) and other paramilitaries under its command. MHA will monitor the big picture even as it secures for states and joint forces the chisel of intelligence gathering outfits such as the National Technical Research Organisation (NTRO), which has in the past year increased drone surveillance over the densely forested Abujmad area in southwest Chhattisgarh, which remains the main rebel hub.

Such a security blanket has certainly contained the rebels across 90 affected districts (of which 19 are in Jharkhand, 16 in Bihar, 15 in Odisha, 14 in Chhattisgarh, 14 across Telangana and Andhra Pradesh, 3 in Maharashtra, with the remainder in Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Kerala, and one in West Bengal). Most Maoist-affected states in India have a surrender and rehabilitation policy, and it rides in tandem with search-and-destroy missions that police and paramilitaries provide. This pincer has massively depleted rebel leadership and ranks with regular killings, arrests, and surrender of its leaders and cadres.

However, it's far from breaking the rebellion's back. There has been speculation of a break between the southern and northern groups of the rebels, often interchangeably referred to as Naxals by government and media, but over the past two years they have managed a shift in leadership of the Communist Party of India (Maoist). Nambala Keshav Rao, who goes by the *nom de guerre* of Basavraj (or Basava Raju) has taken over as chief from Muppala Lakshmana Rao a.k.a Ganapathy. Rao was formerly a long-time head of CPI (Maoist)'s central military commission, the umbrella operational command. The simple point is, Left-wing rebellion, a reality for over 50 years, won't end until poor governance does.

Perhaps MHA can turn its eye to the ongoing human cost even if it abjures peace talks. In

Chhattisgarh, for instance, it is crucial for the conflict-displaced to return to their homes. Activists, including Shubhranshu Choudhary, who among other things initiated what is popularly known as Bultoo—a simple and effective Bluetooth-based rural communication platform in Chhattisgarh—have for a couple of years been campaigning for the return and rehabilitation of those who escaped to other states. Chhattisgarh’s Congress government, which took office at the end-2018 breaking a three-term Bharatiya Janata Party streak, has also made encouraging noises.

However, the reality is still daunting. Where do the returnees go? Their old homes in villages and forests, to which they are actively discouraged from returning by agencies of state? Or to new homes in state-mandated enclaves, slumlike clusters, really, with little economic imperative besides daily wage labour and scrambling for government handouts and, for some, jobs as paramilitaries and state-sponsored vigilantes by another name? That is in any case the present for much of the 50,000 or so who did not manage to escape to Telangana and elsewhere, but were corralled in state-run camps, or were relocated to state-managed rehabilitation ‘villages’.

The central government and its cohorts would do well to focus here and in beginning negotiations for peace, instead of bolstering the mythology of the Urban Naxal, a species that exists not to undermine India, but to evidently provide government spinmeisters a catchy hashtag along with a rickety windmill.

*This column focuses on conflict situations and the convergence of businesses and human rights, and runs on Thursdays.*

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