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Development for Peace: The Decline of Naxalite Violence in India

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After decades of largely unsuccessful military interventions against a long-standing Maoist insurgency, India's large-scale labor market program MGNREGS has helped reduce conflict dramatically.

Other than the conflict in Kashmir, Maoist violence is India's longest-standing internal national security threat. The Maoists are predominantly active in the eastern parts of India, with strongholds in forest areas and places with substantial tribal populations who have seen little improvement in their living conditions since Indian independence 70 years ago. Over time, more than 160 districts have been affected by Maoist violence, and decades of military force by the Indian government have been largely unsuccessful. Conflict intensity escalated in the mid-2000s, but since then Maoist-related deaths have seen an unprecedented decline to reach the lowest level of violence in The number of districts severely affected by Maoist violence fell from 51 districts in 2007 to 12 districts in 2013, and the total number of Maoist-affected districts declined from 165 to 120 districts in the same time period.

Areas with Naxalite activity in 2007. Image credit: Wikimedia.

Areas with Naxalite activity in 2013. Image credit: Wikimedia.

The Naxalite-Maoist insurgency in India

The conflict started with a peasant revolt in the village of Naxalbari in the state of West Bengal in 1967, which led to a rising insurgency called the Naxalite movement. Naxalites use guerilla tactics in their fight against the government, and aim to overthrow the Indian state to create a liberated zone in central India. They wanted to improve the living conditions of the local population through redistribution of land and the revenue from mining activities.

The intensity of the Maoist conflict rose dramatically in the mid-2000s, when previously competing Naxalite groups came together to create the Communist Party of India (Maoist). Large parts of east India were heavily affected by that violence, and the Indian government lost *de facto* territorial control over a number of districts. Civilians were often caught in between the Maoists and government security forces, since both sides had to rely on the local population for information and assistance in remote forest areas.

In 2006, the Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh referred to the Maoist insurgency as the "single biggest internal security challenge ever faced by our country." Maoist-related deaths rose rapidly, peaking with a large attack in 2009-10 that killed 76 policemen in Dantewada district. In recent years, fatalities have fallen to some of the lowest levels in decades, and the Maoists have been pushed out of many traditional areas of their control. According to government statistics, Naxalite deaths have risen by 65% and surrenders by 185% between 2014 and 2016. Maoist activities are now almost exclusively limited to 35 districts, although the insurgents retain a presence in 68 districts across 10 states.

What factors explain this sharp rise and fall in violence?

The Indian central and state governments responded to the increased violence after the creation of the Communist Party of India (Maoist) with a variety of measures. Personnel and spending on security forces were increased, and central and state paramilitary forces started operations against the Maoists that came to be referred to as Operation Green Hunt by the media. At the same time, expenditures on development programs were increased as well, with the hope of improving the living conditions of the local population and thereby the traditionally strained relationship between civilians and the government in Maoist-affected areas.

One of the first development programs in Maoist-affected areas in this time period was MGNREGS (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme), rolled out across India between 2006 and 2008. MGNREGS guarantees 100 days of employment per year for each household at the minimum wage in public-works programs. The work projects focus on drought-proofing, irrigation and infrastructure improvements in Indian villages.

The only eligibility criterion is that a household lives in a rural area and is prepared to work full-time in manual jobs at the minimum wage. This allows households to self-select into the program when they need it and covers about 70 percent of the population, making it the world's largest public-works program. The annual expenditures under the scheme amount to about one percent of India's GDP. In addition to its size, the program is unprecedented in India and worldwide because the program provides a legal guarantee for employment, which is enforceable in courts. It was rolled out in three separate phases, and the first implementation phase of the program was targeted to 200 of India's poorest districts, many of which are in Maoist-affected areas,

such as Dantewada and Bastar districts in Chattisgarh, and Anantapur district in Andhra Pradesh.

What role did MGNREGS play in tackling Maoist violence?

Comparing districts that received MGNREGS to very similar districts that did not receive the program until later, in our research we find police attacks on Maoists intensified after MGNREGS came into effect. This is consistent with an improvement in the relationship of civilians with the government as a result of the program. Since civilians may have important information about the location of the Maoists, who rely on them for shelter and information on police movements, MGNREGS seems to have helped win civilians over and encourage them to share that information with the security forces. The Indian Home Ministry also attributes the increased success of catching Maoists to better intelligence gathering.

In concurrence with the increase in police-initiated attacks, we find that the Maoists started retaliating against civilians. The rebels traditionally concentrated on attacking government forces rather than civilians, which makes this shift an important change in behavior. In leaflets and other documents, Maoists claim that the killed civilians were police informants and threaten to attack other civilians cooperating with the police.

MGNREGS therefore appears to have contributed to the effectiveness of government forces by winning the "hearts and minds" of the local population. While this improved effectiveness lead to a short-run increase in violence as government forces become more pro-active, violence declined over time as security forces won more battles against the insurgents.

This matches the recent substantial decline in Maoist-related violence. Up until around 2010 when MGNREGS was a relatively new program, Maoist fatalities increased substantially, and many top leaders surrendered. Since then, India has seen an impressive decline in Maoist-related deaths and areas under Maoist control. Anti-poverty programs like MGNREGS can therefore support more traditional counter-insurgency strategies if they manage to improve the local population's relationship with the government. Since civilians take on large risks when choosing to share information on insurgents with government forces, this strategy will only be successful if civilians believe that the benefits from the program are large and long-lasting enough to be worth potential retaliation by the insurgents.

MGNREGS was set up to be a more permanent program than other initiatives because of the legal guarantee and was enacted partly due to pressure from NGOs and social activists, who also played an important role in monitoring implementation quality. This buy-in from government and NGOs makes the program very different from similar programs elsewhere, and is likely to have contributed to its success. Lower actual benefits than promised by the government remain a challenge in many developing countries, including India, however. If governments do not ensure a high level of implementation quality, transitory programs and broken promises will sow distrust with citizens, making future investments less effective.

Image credit: Adam Jones/Wikimedia.

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