National Research Journal of Social Sciences
Volume-11, Issue-1, January-June 2026
PP: 363-373

ISSN: 2348-473X
Peer Reviewed & Refereed Journal (IF: 6.74)
Journal Website: www.nrjss.in

FROM TOTAL SOCIAL FACT TO TOTAL WAR: BASTAR AND THE SIX DIMENSIONS OF INSURGENCY

Nand Kishor Dehary

Chhattisgarh Police Dept., Aarakshak, DRG Naxal Operations, Dantewada, India

Danendra

Govt. Danteshwari PG College, Guest Lecturer, Dept. of Sociology, Dantewada, India

Suraj Sahu

Govt. Danteshwari PG College, Guest Lecturer, Dept. of Psychology, Dantewada, India

Corresponding Author: **Nand Kishor Dehary**

ABSTRACT

The Naxalite–Maoist insurgency in Chhattisgarh's Bastar division has claimed nearly 12,000 lives since 2000, including 4,138 civilians, 2,723 security personnel, and 5,063 insurgents. India has responded with over 14,000 kilometres of new roads, hundreds of residential schools, and thousands of captured or killed cadres. The insurgency continues anyway. This paper reads the conflict through Marcel Mauss's concept of the *fait social total*: a phenomenon that cannot be isolated into any single register. We argue the conflict operates across six dimensions at once. Three are structural: material (land and resources), institutional (governance, law, health), and corporeal (bodies and displacement). Three are psychosocial: relational (trust and attachment between state and communities), moral (frameworks of right action), and existential (meaning, identity, purpose). These dimensions interact through feedback loops that absorb and redirect any intervention reaching only one or two of them. Four historical episodes are examined across all six dimensions: the colonial forest enclosures, the Maoist entry, the Salwa Judum, and the current phase of counterinsurgency. The pattern is consistent. Security-first and development-first approaches both fail because the dimensions they leave alone reconstitute the conditions for insurgency. Durable peace requires intervention across all six, and it requires recognition of Adivasi identity rather than assimilation into the mainstream.

Keyword: Naxalism; Bastar; fait social total; moral injury; Adivasi; peacebuilding

INTRODUCTION

In early 2024, Indian security forces reported killing 73 Maoist insurgents in Bastar in just three months—more than in most entire years of the preceding decade.[1] The Ministry of Home Affairs has repeatedly declared the insurgency to be in its "last phase," pointing to the construction of over 14,000 kilometres of roads and hundreds of Eklavya schools in regions that previously lacked basic electricity.[2] Maoist cadres do not appear to have received the news. They continue to recruit from villages where roads have been built. Surrendered insurgents return to the movement despite cash rehabilitation packages. Civilians continue to die in crossfire and unexamined "encounters." This puzzle cannot be resolved using dominant analytical frameworks, which treat Naxalism strictly as a security threat or an economic crisis, often leaving the deep psychological drivers underexplored. To understand the endurance of this conflict, we must examine the empirical reality of Bastar. The region comprises seven districts—Bastar, Dantewada, Bijapur, Sukma, Kondagaon, Narayanpur, and Kanker—covering approximately 39,117 square kilometres.[4] The population is approximately 70% Adivasi, belonging to the Gond, Maria, Muria, Dorla, and Halba communities,[4] whose relationship

ISSN: 2348-473X
Peer Reviewed & Refereed Journal (IF: 6.74)
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with the forest is simultaneously economic, social, and existential. The poverty is not incidental to the conflict. As Table 1 shows, it concentrates precisely in the districts where the insurgency is strongest:

Table 1. Multidimensional Poverty Index headcount ratios, Bastar division districts. Adapted from reference [5].

District	MPI Headcount Ratio (%)	National Average (%)	Chhattisgarh Average (%)
Dantewada	54.59	14.96	24.38
Bastar	49.47	14.96	24.38
Narayanpur	48.83	14.96	24.38
Bijapur	47.12	14.96	24.38
Sukma	45.67	14.96	24.38
Kondagaon	39.82	14.96	24.38
Kanker	31.06	14.96	24.38

METHODOLOGY

This paper is a secondary-data conceptual framework study. The data corpus comprises government datasets,[1,2,4,5,6,7,8,9] ethnographic scholarship,[10,11,12,13,14] legal records,[15] and human rights documentation.[16] The analytical method is structured comparison: each of four historical episodes is examined across the six dimensions of the framework developed below, with cross-dimensional interactions traced through available data. No primary fieldwork was conducted. Secondary sources are produced by interested parties—the state, the Maoist movement, NGOs, and journalists—each with particular commitments. Government data in conflict zones is contested: "encounter" deaths may include extrajudicial killings, civilian deaths are underreported, and Maoist sources are propagandistic. The framework is diagnostic, explaining the conflict's persistence, rather than predictive. A deeper problem is worth acknowledging. This paper uses the language of clinical psychology—attachment, complex trauma, moral injury—to describe the experience of communities we have never met, in places we have not been, drawing on accounts written by people whose access was itself shaped by the conflict they documented. The framework may illuminate; it may also distort. We have tried to hold both possibilities in mind.

The Insurgency as Fait Social Total: An Analytical Framework

Mauss argued that isolating one dimension of a complex societal event destroys our understanding of the phenomenon.[3] The gift was simultaneously economic, legal, moral, and religious; to separate any one dimension was to misunderstand the whole. He called such phenomena *faits sociaux totaux*: total social facts whose dimensions are mutually constitutive. The extension of Mauss beyond exchange has precedent. Parry demonstrated the concept's application to asymmetric exchanges in Indian society.[17] Erikson, studying the Buffalo Creek flood, showed that collective trauma damages material, relational, and symbolic life simultaneously—a *fait social total* of destruction rather than exchange.[18] Das demonstrated that catastrophic events operate across material, psychological, and symbolic registers at once.[19]

Extended to protracted conflict, the Naxalite insurgency operates simultaneously across six dimensions:

ISSN: 2348-473X
Peer Reviewed & Refereed Journal (IF: 6.74)
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- **Material:** Control over land, forests, and resources. [20,21]
- **Institutional:** Legitimacy of the justice system, healthcare, and governance. [22,23]
- **Relational:** The level of trust, fear, and attachment between communities and the state. [24,25,26]
- **Corporeal:** The physical toll via displacement, injury, and malnutrition. [19,27]
- **Moral:** Frameworks of right action and the lasting injury caused by their violation. [28,29,30]
- **Existential:** The availability of meaning, identity, and purpose. [31,32,33]

The central claim is that these dimensions are connected through feedback loops: interventions targeting one or two dimensions while ignoring the rest are absorbed, neutralised, or rendered counterproductive by dynamics in the unaddressed dimensions. A road built in a district where over half of forest rights claims have been rejected and the community's relationship with the state is defined by decades of violence is not experienced as provision—it is experienced as infrastructure for extraction and surveillance. The physical road is identical in both interpretations. Its social reality is entirely different.

(Note: The dimensions are analytically distinct but phenomenologically simultaneous. The prose that follows presents them sequentially—as materially, institutionally, relationally, and so on—because linear text demands this. The reader should hold in mind that what is separated for exposition is united in experience; the Adivasi standing in the burnt remains of a village is not experiencing material loss first, then institutional betrayal, then moral injury. These happen at once.)

The Historical Trajectory of the Conflict

Instead of isolated events, Bastar's history reveals a continuous cycle where structural shifts trigger profound psychological crises. Four episodes are examined, each across all dimensions of the framework.

I. Colonial Enclosure (1865–1947)

Before colonial contact, the forest functioned as the economic base and sacred geography for Gond kingdoms under customary tenure.[12] The Indian Forest Acts of 1865 and 1878 shattered this integrated world. Materially, customary commons were converted into state property; shifting cultivation was criminalised and forest taxes introduced.[34] Institutionally, forest "offences" (gathering produce, clearing land, grazing livestock) became the primary interface between Adivasis and the colonial state. For most people the first experience of formal law was punishment rather than protection. Relationally, the colonial state was racially, linguistically, and legally alien, and the bond between governing authority and governed communities was adversarial from inception.[13]

Resistance was met with bodily suppression. The Bhumkal rebellion of 1910, provoked by forest restrictions, forced labour, and new taxes, was put down violently: villages burnt, leaders imprisoned, collective punishments imposed.[13] The Acts also created a moral disjuncture. Practices obligatory within Adivasi moral systems, such as rotational cultivation integrated with ritual observance and the collection of forest produce, were declared criminal by a framework that did not recognise the moral world within which Adivasis lived. Most fundamentally, this era initiated existential dispossession. The forest was a cosmological anchor: the site of deities, ancestor spirits, and collective memory. Its legal alienation was the beginning of the destruction of frameworks through which life is made meaningful.[35]

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Independence in 1947 did not end the pattern; it inherited it. The Indian Forest Act of 1927, which consolidated the colonial regime, remained in force and was expanded. State-led industrialisation turned Bastar's mineral wealth into a resource frontier: the Bailadila iron ore mines, opened in the 1960s under the National Mineral Development Corporation, displaced Adivasi communities without meaningful consultation and shipped ore to Japanese steel mills under long-term contracts.[36] The 1966 Bastar firing, in which the former Maharaja Pravir Chandra Bhanj Deo and dozens of Adivasi supporters were killed by police during a protest at the palace in Jagdalpur, showed that the post-colonial state would use the same bodily suppression its colonial predecessor had used, and for the same structural reasons.[13] By the 1970s, a combination of forest laws unchanged since 1927, mining displacement, and the collapse of customary governance had produced exactly the conditions of accumulated grievance that Maoist cadres would encounter when they arrived from Andhra Pradesh. This template held for the rest of the century.

II. The Maoist Entry (1980–2005)

When Maoist cadres from Andhra Pradesh entered Bastar in the early 1980s, they encountered communities with over a century of accumulated grievance and at least two major rebellions in living memory. Their success was sociopolitical rather than military. The early cadres were few and lightly armed. What they had that mattered was a willingness to address multiple dimensions simultaneously, and through this they established parallel governance across much of southern Bastar. Materially, they confronted exploitative intermediaries: they organised tendu leaf collectors, forced contractors to raise prices (reportedly doubling or tripling in some areas), and destroyed debt records perpetuating bonded labour.[11] Institutionally, they constructed a counter-state through *jan adalats* that adjudicated land disputes, domestic violence, and witchcraft accusations—cases the formal justice system either ignored or resolved through processes inaccessible to illiterate, non-Hindi-speaking Adivasis located days of travel from the nearest court.[14] Relationally, cadres lived among communities, sharing food and risk, offering physical co-presence and reciprocal obligation in a way the state never had. The deeper appeal lay in the moral and existential dimensions. Marxism-Leninism-Maoism provided an explanatory framework (suffering was the product of identifiable historical forces, not fate) that performed a powerful psychological function for communities whose experience of systematic disadvantage had gone unexplained. More fundamentally, the movement offered what Frankl would recognise as a meaning-system[31]: suffering was historical, identity was revolutionary, sacrifice was redemptive. Young Adivasis were trapped in what Turner called liminality [37], their customary world weakened but no viable modern alternative available. The movement offered a resolution. Turner's original concept described a temporary ritual threshold, a passage between defined social positions. But the Adivasi condition was not temporary; it had no endpoint and no reincorporation in sight. The Maoists resolved this open-ended suspension not by completing the transition but by converting it into a permanent identity. The revolutionary became a stable category, giving structure and meaning to what would otherwise have remained an indefinite threshold state. Leaving the movement meant returning to the same marginal, unrecognised existence that had driven recruitment in the first place.

This is not a defence of the movement. Maoist governance was authoritarian, and the execution of suspected informers produced its own moral injuries within the communities the movement claimed to serve. The point is that their intervention was multidimensional in a way the state was not—and this asymmetry, more than any military factor, explains their four-decade presence despite massive material disadvantage.

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Peer Reviewed & Refereed Journal (IF: 6.74)
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III: The Salwa Judum Cascade (2005–2011)

The state's sponsorship of the Salwa Judum ("Purification Hunt") militia produced a cascading collapse across every dimension of the framework. Intended as a security operation, it resulted in the burning of 644 villages and displaced an estimated 30,000 to 50,000 people.[15] This devastated the material foundation of Adivasi life. Homesteads, granaries, seed stock, livestock, and personal documents were destroyed. Internally displaced persons who fled to Andhra Pradesh lost access to the forest economy that sustained household income and nutrition. Bhatia documented alarming malnutrition and untreated illness in displacement camps.[10] The structural effect, the creation of "empty" land through displacement, aligns with Harvey's concept of accumulation by dispossession.[20]

This era cemented a profound institutional crisis. The state armed Adivasi neighbours against each other, many of them minors, as Special Police Officers—fundamentally betraying its constitutional duty.[16] The broader justice and health infrastructure compounded the damage, as Table 2 demonstrates:

Table 2. Institutional failure indicators for justice and health infrastructure. Adapted from references [6, 7, 38, 39, 40]. Figures are approximate estimates; exact year-to-year variation exists across the reporting period.

Indicator	Local Reality	Benchmark
ST share of prison population (Chhattisgarh)	~35–40%	~10% (National)
ST share of general population (Chhattisgarh)	30.6%	8.6% (National)
PHCs functioning 24x7 (Bastar division)	~30–40%	100%
Specialist doctors at CHCs (% posts filled)	~10–15%	100%
Psychiatrists per 100,000 population	<0.05	1.7 (global median)

Adivasis constitute 30.6% of Chhattisgarh's population [38] but are historically overrepresented at roughly one-third to two-fifths of its prison population.[6] People whose bodies were harmed by state violence could not access state healthcare—a convergence that reinforced the perception of the state as an agent of harm rather than a source of care.

The relational rupture was the Salwa Judum's most durable damage. The state was constitutionally obligated to protect these communities; Instead, it armed their neighbours against them, destroyed their homes, and denied it. The communities could not sever the relationship because they needed ration cards, legal identity, and market access. What emerged was complex trauma characterised by simultaneous dependence and terror.[25,26] These concepts require caution. Herman and Freyd developed them for individual survivors; the extension to collective experience is analogical, not diagnostic. The resemblance between the patterns they describe and the patterns observable in Bastar is striking enough to be analytically productive, but it is a resemblance, not an identity. For the tens of thousands of IDPs who remained displaced, even the Maoist movement's resolution of liminality was unavailable. Their condition became what Szakolczai and Thomassen have theorised as permanent liminality in its purest form[41,42]: suspended between a destroyed past and an inaccessible future,

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Peer Reviewed & Refereed Journal (IF: 6.74)
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with no institutional mechanism for transition and no movement offering to convert the suspension into identity. The moral injury[29,30] inflicted during this period fell on security personnel pressured for body counts, on cadres executing suspected informers, and on civilians forced into daily complicity with both sides. It severely eroded the capacity for empathy and negotiation across all actors.

The cascade is traceable: the security operation (institutional) required village destruction (material), which displaced populations (corporeal), which severed people from landscapes and kin (existential, relational), which deepened institutional illegitimacy (feedback loop), which inflicted moral injury on all parties, which expanded Maoist recruitment. SATP data show a marked increase in Naxal-related fatalities in the years following the Salwa Judum's initiation.[1] The cascade was recursive; each dimension fed back into the others. This cycle has continued into the present.

IV: The Current Phase (2020–2026)

Considering a single data point. The Forest Rights Act of 2006 was designed to correct the colonial dispossession documented in Episode I. It was meant to legally return to Adivasi communities the land and forest rights that the Forest Acts of 1865 and 1878 had stripped. Its implementation in Chhattisgarh:

Table 3. Forest Rights Act implementation in Chhattisgarh. Adapted from reference [8]. Figures are approximate cumulative totals.

Category	Claims Filed	Approved	Rejected	Rejection Rate
Individual Forest Rights	~800,000+	~380,000	~420,000+	Over 52%
Community Forest Rights	~40,000+	~14,000	~26,000+	Over 65%

Over half of individual claims rejected. Nearly two-thirds of community claims rejected. Each rejection legally reaffirms the dispossession this legislation was designed to undo. Meanwhile, new mining leases continue in areas where forest rights remain unrecognised and free, prior, informed consent has not been obtained.

The state's broader strategy pairs this unresolved material injustice with aggressive security operations and rapid infrastructure development. Record "neutralisations" in 2024. Geographic contraction to a handful of core districts. And beneath these metrics, the structural and psychosocial foundations of the conflict untouched.

The institutional investments are real—children in Eklavya schools receive otherwise inaccessible education, and roads reduce travel time to markets and health facilities. But these coexist with a justice system where Adivasis remain overrepresented among undertrials, and with coercive legislation (UAPA, CSPSA) deployed against community leaders. Because the state has not repaired relational trust, new roads and mobile towers are not experienced as benevolent public services. Roads built under security escort enable troop convoys. Mobile towers enable intelligence gathering. Roads do not build trust.

The existential dimension remains the deepest failure. The state's implicit offer is assimilation: enter the market economy, attend state schools, and suffering will end. But this requires abandoning Adivasi identity as constituted through the forest, customary governance, and collective self-determination. Taylor and Honneth distinguished inclusion, where the marginalised become like the mainstream,

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Peer Reviewed & Refereed Journal (IF: 6.74)
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from recognition, where the mainstream acknowledges the equal value of different ways of being.[32,33] The state has offered the first. It has never seriously attempted the second. The insurgency persists because it remains, for many, the only available framework offering identity and meaning on terms that do not require abandoning who they are.

DISCUSSION

Why Single-Dimension Interventions Fail

Across 160 years, the Indian state has consistently addressed the material and institutional dimensions of this conflict while actively damaging the relational, corporeal, moral, and existential ones. This explains why linear reasoning—more operations equals fewer insurgent equals less conflict—does not hold. The conflict is sustained by a feedback loop:

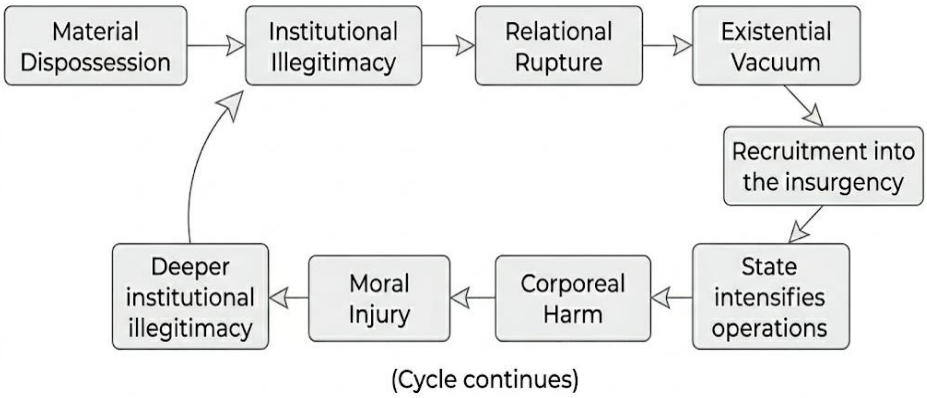

Figure: 1 Sustained Feedback Loop

Two secondary loops reinforce this cycle. A violence–moral injury loop: state violence inflicts moral injury on security forces, cadres, and civilians alike, eroding the trust and empathy that negotiation requires, thereby entrenching violence as the primary mode of interaction. An infrastructure–surveillance loop: infrastructure built in a context of broken trust is experienced as surveillance and control, decreasing the state's legitimacy as a development provider, which the state reads as requiring yet more security operations, which produces more harm. Linear interventions cannot solve a system with these properties. Disrupt one point and the system reconstitutes itself from whatever you left alone.

In this vacuum, the Maoist movement remains resilient. While its governance is authoritarian, it offers a legible worldview—one that makes sense of dispossession and gives Adivasi lives a narrative they can inhabit. Cash surrender packages consistently fail because people will not abandon that narrative for money unless an equally meaningful alternative exists.

One objection deserves a direct response. Does this framework do anything more than redescribe what we already know in more elaborate vocabulary? We think it does—the identification of specific feedback loops and the demonstration that dimensional interactions are the mechanism of persistence, not just a feature of it, goes beyond redescription. But we are aware that the line between a productive analytical architecture and an overcomplicated restatement of the obvious is not always clear, and the reader should judge for themselves.

The pattern is not unique to Bastar. In Colombia, the 2016 FARC agreement succeeded in part because it addressed land reform (material), transitional justice (institutional and moral), political incorporation (institutional and existential), and victim recognition (relational and existential)

ISSN: 2348-473X
Peer Reviewed & Refereed Journal (IF: 6.74)
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simultaneously; where implementation has stalled—particularly on land reform—dissident groups have emerged.[43] Nepal's 2006 Comprehensive Peace Agreement combined political integration of the Maoists, constitutional recognition of ethnic identities, and land reform commitments; the peace has broadly held, though incomplete reforms continue to generate tensions.[44] Northern Ireland's Good Friday Agreement addressed institutional power-sharing, relational recognition ("parity of esteem"), and existential identity (dual nationality provisions), but the absence of a comprehensive truth commission continues to generate friction over legacy issues.[45] In each case, durable peace required multidimensional intervention, and the dimensions most often neglected—the relational, moral, and existential—proved critical to long-term stability.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PEACEBUILDING

If the insurgency operates across six interconnected dimensions, peacebuilding must address all of them. In practice, certain dimensions share intervention pathways—institutional reform and relational repair both require changes in how the state presents itself to communities; corporeal healing and moral repair both require acknowledgement of harm. The following implications are grouped by shared pathways, not because the dimensions are interchangeable, but because their entry points overlap.

- **Structural Repair:** The legal infrastructure of dispossession must be dismantled. The state must urgently audit the over 52% rejection rate of individual forest rights claims and the over 65% rejection rate of community rights claims,[8] and institute a strict moratorium on displacement without free, prior, and informed consent.
- **Institutional & Relational Repair:** The justice system must reduce the severe overrepresentation of Adivasis among undertrials.[6] The state must initiate a truth and accountability process regarding the Salwa Judum; without acknowledging this historical betrayal, every subsequent state action is interpreted through the lens of betrayal.
- **Corporeal & Moral Healing:** Given the severe shortage of psychiatric professionals in rural Chhattisgarh,[39] culturally appropriate mental health services must be integrated into primary care. All parties must publicly acknowledge the moral injuries inflicted—from extrajudicial killings by the state to informer executions by Maoists. Without mutual acknowledgement, the incommensurable moral worlds persist and negotiation remains impossible.
- **Existential Recognition:** The state must abandon its demand for Adivasi assimilation. Peace requires genuine recognition [32,33]: acknowledging Adivasi identity, self-governance, and their relationship with the forest as a legitimate and valued way of existing—not an obstacle to development.

CONCLUSION

The Naxalism conflict in Bastar consistently regenerates because the insurgent movement offers what the existing social order does not: a world in which Adivasi suffering has meaning and action has purpose. Cash surrender packages fail because people will not abandon a community of meaning for money without an equally meaningful alternative. The state has never offered one.

Durable peace requires simultaneous, sustained action across all the dimensions identified in this paper—structural and psychosocial alike. This demands more than new security policies; it requires a fundamentally different relationship between the Indian state and its most marginalised citizens.

The costs of failure are not abstract. They are counted in nearly 12,000 dead, in displaced families who cannot return home, in children growing up between incommensurable moral worlds, in security

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Peer Reviewed & Refereed Journal (IF: 6.74)
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personnel carrying wounds their institutions refuse to acknowledge, and in the slow erasure of ways of being that, once destroyed, cannot be reconstructed.

The Bastar conflict is often called India's largest internal security challenge. It is. But it is also, more fundamentally, a failure of recognition: a failure to see, in the people of the forest, citizens whose existence calls for respect rather than management.

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