

# A red sunset? Why Maoist movement is on the decline

In 2025 alone, 270 Naxalites have been killed and 680 arrested, with another 1,225 having surrendered to authorities, Union Home Minister Amit Shah said on Sunday

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The Maoist insurgency peaked in the 2000s, which saw unprecedented violence between the insurgents and security forces. This is a photo of a training camp on the banks of Amanat river in the Patan block of Palamu district, under the leadership of Zonal Commander Giriji, in 2007. (File)

Almost six decades after the Naxalbari uprising, an armed peasant revolt led by a breakaway faction of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) which spurred a lengthy left-wing insurgency in India, the Maoist movement is at a crossroads.

Under relentless pressure from the government — Union Home Minister [Amit Shah](#) has vowed to **“end” the Naxal insurgency by next March** — top Maoist leaders are divided on

how to proceed.

45%

For the second time in a month, Mallojula Venugopal Rao, the ideological head and chief spokesperson of the CPI (Maoist), earlier this week wrote a letter stating that it is time for the “cessation of armed struggle” in order to “save the party”.

Rao's first letter dated September 12 invited the wrath of other Maoist leaders who were quick to isolate him; Telangana State Committee spokesperson Jagan issued a statement that the party still stands by its commitment to armed struggle.

This prompted Rao, 71, to release a second letter, reaffirming his position, and claiming he had the support of both senior leaders and the rank and file of CPI(Maoist).

### A movement in decline

At the heart of the crisis among the Maoists is the relentless crackdown by central armed forces, backed by elite anti-Maoist state police units, which has brought the armed guerrillas to their knees.

Much of the top leadership, including the likes of former General Secretary Nambala Keshav Rao alias Basvaraj, and Central Committee members Katta Ramachandra Reddy, Kadari Satyanarayana Reddy, Gajarla Ravi, Chalpathi, Sahdev Soren, Balkrishna, and Narasimha, and Chalam have been killed this year. As have scores of armed cadres.

The last holdouts are holed up in pockets in Bastar, Dandakaranya, and areas along the Chhattisgarh-Telangana border. Cut off from all sides, the Maoists are running low on arms and ammunition, large caches of which have been seized by security forces.

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In recent years, Maoists have also struggled to recruit new cadres to replenish their diminishing ranks. While recruitment from the non-tribal populations ceased more than a decade ago, today, even tribal youth are disinclined to join the party. This is, in large part, due to the inability of the Maoist ideology to keep up with rapid material and social changes in areas that were once hotbeds of revolutionary fervour.

Sources say that tribal communities greatly benefit from government welfare schemes and free education for children, making them less likely to want to join the armed struggle. Young

people, who have accessed mobile phones and the Internet, are no longer interested in the austere jungle life of a Maoist guerilla, spent almost constantly looking over one's shoulder

This has meant that much of the top Maoist leadership, who waged war against the Indian state for decades, has grown old; many are learnt to be suffering from serious illnesses. Thus, surrendering and retiring peacefully, with the benefits provided by the government, appears to be a lucrative option under current circumstances. The wives and partners of many top leaders have already surrendered.

### Is this really the end?

Both state governments and the Centre, however, view the Maoists' surrender offers with skepticism. This is because a similar script has played out in the past.

In June 2004, the Maoists tried to make a peace deal with the Y S Rajashekara Reddy government in then undivided Andhra Pradesh. But deep-seated distrust between the two sides led to the talks collapsing within months; the Maoists believed that Reddy's offer was never serious, while the state government held a nagging suspicion that the rebels had agreed to talks to buy time and regroup. The collapse of the talks led to a surge in violence over the next few years.

This is why many officers, who were previously involved in anti-Naxalite operations, have been surprised about a Telugu Maoist leader writing letters to end the armed struggle.

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"The Naxalite movement's ideology is armed struggle and Telugu Maoist leaders are fiercely committed to it. Any offer of peace or surrender is a ruse to buy time to regroup," one official said. "This time it may be to save the party from annihilation, they will want some remnants to survive for the future."

Another official stated: "There seems to be an understanding among some senior leaders that if the Centre goes about eliminating the insurgency the way it has, CPI(Maoist) will cease to exist. To keep the ideology and the party alive, they have to prevent that from happening, and cessation of armed hostilities and joining the mainstream seems to be the only option out".

In April, the Centre rejected a letter, purportedly by the banned CPI (Maoist), offering a ceasefire and peace talks under certain specific terms. The government is yet to officially

react to the two letters written by Rao.

## From 1967 to 2025

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The “Maoist-Naxal movement” began in Naxalbari in northern West Bengal on May 18, 1967 when some 150 peasants, armed with only sickles, daggers, and spears, attacked properties of landlords, seized maunds of paddy, and started seizing land.

Charu Mazumdar, the ideologue behind the Naxalbari uprising, was a hardcore CPI(M) member who, between 1965 and 1967, penned eight monographs, known as the ‘Historic Eight Documents’, which laid down the ideological fundamentals of the decades-long insurgency. Among other things, Mazumdar claimed that the Indian state was a bourgeois institution, accused communist parties of “revisionism” for deciding to work within the framework of this bourgeois state, and advocated for a protracted revolutionary war, on the lines of what Mao Zedong waged in China or Fidel Castro and Che Guevara waged in Cuba, to overthrow the Indian state.

The uprising led to a split in CPI(M) which opposed armed struggle. Many communists, including Mazumdar and his comrade-in-arms, Kanu Sanyal, were expelled from the party. They went on to form the CPI(Marxist-Leninist) in 1969.

A government crackdown on CPI(ML) and the Naxalites, as the revolutionaries came to be known, however, all but ended the original movement. Many leaders went underground, surrendered, or were captured or killed by the forces. Mazumdar himself was arrested; he died in police custody in 1972.

But even as the movement petered out in Bengal, it resonated in many parts of the country. Most notably, it entered Andhra Pradesh through Srikakulam, a district where tensions between tribal farmers and landlords had long been simmering. In October 1969, these tensions came to a boil: peasants attacked landlords, seized grain and land, and armed themselves, joining splinter groups of the CPI(ML).

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Over the next decade or so, the Maoist movement spread through the heart of India, affecting Maharashtra, present-day Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand, Odisha, Bihar, undivided Andhra Pradesh, and Bengal. The leadership, however, was dominated by Telugu-speakers who not



only provided the ideological framing for the movement, but also raised funds and helped recruit lakhs of young men and women

45%

In the 1970s, the Regional Engineering College at Warangal emerged as the fountainhead of the Maoist ideology. Hundreds of students went underground, and joined the armed struggle, leaving behind families. Many never returned.

In 1980, Kondapalli Seetaramaiah and Dr K Chiranjeevi founded the CPI(ML) People's War to better organise the armed struggle. While committed to Majumdar's ideology, Seetaramaiah sought to create a more efficient organisation to wage a guerilla war.

Over the years, the Maoists, according to a press release by the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA), were responsible for "armed violence (against civilians and the state), extortion (mostly of rich landowners or businesses), destruction of infrastructure, and recruitment of children and civilians."

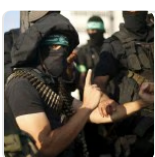
The insurgency peaked in the 2000s: the People's Liberation Guerrilla Army, the armed wing of the Maoists, was formed in 2000, and the CPI(Maoist) came up in 2004 after the merger of a number of factions including Seetaramaiah's CPI(ML) People's War and the Bihar-Bengal-based Maoist Communist Centre.

In the late 2000s, left-wing extremism (LWE, the government's official nomenclature) affected nearly 180 affected districts across an area of 92,000 sq km. But the government's efforts, "combining security enforcement, inclusive development, and community engagement" according to one MHA press release, has made a significant impact since.

The number of LWE-affected districts reduced to only 38 in April 2024, with only six of these being deemed "districts of concern" where additional resources need to be deployed.

Speaking at an event in New [Delhi](#) on Sunday, Shah said that in 2025 alone, 270 Naxalites have been killed and 680 arrested, with another 1,225 having surrendered to authorities. He said: "The Modi government promotes a policy of surrender, but a bullet will be met with a bullet".

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