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Resource, Resistance, and Reconstruction: A Political Economy Analysis of Bastar's Transformation

Prithviraj Deshmukh

Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Legislative Law, Ajeenkya DY Patil University, Lohegaon, Pune

Email: pruthvirajdeshmukh1104@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This paper provides a political economy analysis of the Bastar division in Chhattisgarh, tracing its structural transition from an insurgent core within India's "Red Corridor" to an integrated industrial resource frontier. Grounded in theories of internal colonialism and resource extraction, the study evaluates how historical Adivasi alienation—originating in British colonial forest legislation and reinforced by post-independence industrial policies—created an institutional vacuum exploited by Left-Wing Extremism (LWE). Incorporating qualitative field observations regarding insurgent recruitment dynamics alongside a socio-political analysis of local commanders such as Madvi Hidma, the paper explores how the immediate authority of weaponry often superseded abstract Marxist-Leninist ideology for young tribal recruits. It then analyzes the state's modern stabilization apparatus, specifically examining high-density security deployments, targeted welfare infrastructure under initiatives like Niyad Nellanar, and formal surrender and rehabilitation frameworks. Ultimately, the paper argues that while security-led integration has successfully reduced active combat, long-term regional stability depends on reconciling resource extraction with constitutional tribal autonomy under the Fifth Schedule, PESA, and the Forest Rights Act.

Keywords: Bastar, political economy, Left-Wing Extremism (LWE), Adivasi rights, internal colonialism, resource extraction, Madvi Hidma, Fifth Schedule, PESA, Forest Rights Act (FRA), Niyad Nellanar, Chhattisgarh

1. Introduction

The Bastar division of Chhattisgarh, comprising seven interior districts spanning the dense forest belts of central-eastern India, presents a critical study in subaltern politics, state power, and mineral extraction. Geologically, the region sits upon some of the subcontinent's richest mineral deposits, containing high-grade hematite iron ore across the Bailadila range, alongside reserves of bauxite, tin, corundum, and critical mineral prospects. Demographically, it remains the ancestral domain of diverse Adivasi communities—including the Gond, Muria, Maria, Halba, and Bhatra tribes—whose livelihoods have historically depended on subsistence agriculture and the collection of non-timber forest produce.

For over three decades, external perception of Bastar was dominated by its designation as the epicenter of Left-Wing Extremism (LWE). The region formed the operational heartland of the People's Liberation Guerrilla Army (PLGA), the armed wing of the Communist Party of India (Maoist). However, intense security operations, aggressive road infrastructure expansion, and a wave of insurgent surrenders have significantly altered ground realities. As active conflict recedes, the central and state governments have accelerated the integration of Bastar into the national market economy. Understanding this shift requires moving beyond simple law-and-order narratives to analyze the structural political economy driving Bastar's journey from a historical conflict zone to an emerging industrial frontier.

2. Historical Background: How Colonial and Post-Independence Policies Alienated Local Communities

2.1 Colonial Rules and the Subaltern Response

The roots of structural alienation in Bastar long predate modern counter-insurgency or ideological movements. Before British intervention, tribal communities managed forest commons through customary governance systems rooted in sacred geography and lineage rights. This equilibrium was shattered by the imposition of formal colonial authority and the systematic enclosure of forest spaces. The enactment of the Indian Forest Acts of 1865 and 1878, followed by the Imperial Forest Circular of 1888, established the legal fiction of state eminent domain over uncultivated lands.

By classifying vast swathes of Bastar's natural habitat as "Reserved" and "Protected" forests, colonial administrators criminalised traditional shifting cultivation (podu) and restricted the collection of minor forest produce. State-backed timber contractors and revenue officers moved into the interior,

establishing an extractive regime that treated indigenous inhabitants as illegal occupants on their ancestral lands. This statutory dispossession provoked repeated subaltern uprisings across the 19th and early 20th centuries.

The most significant of these was the Bhumkal Rebellion of 1910. Centered around Jagdalpur, Kanger, and Parabkot, and led by figureheads such as Gunda Dhur alongside members of the local royal lineage including Lal Kalendra Singh and Rani Subran Kuar, the rebellion was an organized attempt to reclaim sovereignty over *Jal*, *Jungle*, *Jameen* (Water, Forest, Land). Although brutally suppressed by British troops, the Bhumkal established a durable tradition of subaltern resistance against external administrative encroachment.

2.2 Post-Independence Internal Colonialism and Mineral Extraction

The post-1947 Indian state did not dismantle these colonial forest management structures; instead, it repurposed them to serve national industrial planning. Under the Nehruvian framework of heavy industrialization, Bastar was framed primarily as a hinterland storehouse of raw materials vital for national modernization.

The defining moment of this post-independence extractive push occurred in the late 1960s with the opening of the National Mineral Development Corporation (NMDC) iron ore complex at Bailadila in Dantewada. Bailadila Deposit No. 14, developed in part to export high-grade ore to Japanese steel mills, brought heavy earthmoving machinery, railway corridors, and non-tribal technical personnel into the heart of South Bastar.

However, the socio-economic benefits of this massive capital insertion failed to trickle down to the local population. While high-grade iron ore traveled via the dedicated Kothavalasa–Kirandul (KK) railway line to coastlines and manufacturing hubs, neighboring Adivasi hamlets remained completely cut off from basic state services. Into the late 20th century, literacy rates across interior blocks remained in single digits, primary healthcare was practically non-existent, and institutional credit was absent, leaving villagers vulnerable to informal usury and harassment by local revenue and forest subordinates. This dynamic created classic conditions of internal colonialism: local natural wealth was systematically drained to fuel urban industrial growth, while the host region bore all the social and environmental costs.

3. The Naxalite Intervention: Institutional Vacuums and Local Recruitment Realities

3.1 Capitalizing on the Institutional Vacuum

In the late 1980s, cadres of the People's War Group (PWG)—which later merged into the CPI (Maoist) in 2004—crossed the Indravati River from Andhra Pradesh to establish rear bases in the thick forest canopies of Abujmarh and South Bastar. Entering a landscape marked by state neglect and administrative abuse, the insurgents built local legitimacy through targeted interventions in the rural political economy.

Rather than focusing initially on abstract doctrine, the party organized Adivasis around immediate survival needs. They challenged the low prices paid by government-backed federations and private middlemen for *tendu* leaves (used for rolling bidis) and mahua flowers, successfully bargaining for higher collection rates. They instituted *Jan Adalats* (people's courts) to resolve land, inheritance, and domestic disputes without the delays and corruption associated with distant formal courts. Additionally, the insurgents built a parallel tax base by levying systematic surcharges on civil works contractors, timber merchants, and mining fleets operating along the fringes of state-controlled roads.

3.2 Ideology versus the Micro-Mechanisms of Recruitment

While official party literature and state counter-insurgency literature both frame the movement in heavy ideological terms—as a protracted popular war to overthrow the state—field-level dynamics reveal a much more complex picture. Ground-level interviews and accounts from former cadres indicate that formal Marxist-Leninist-Maoist theory played a minimal role in the initial decision of most young tribal recruits to join local squads (*dals*).

In underdeveloped villages where interactions with state authority were historically limited to punitive visits by forest guards (*naka-dars*), police constables, or land revenue officials, young Adivasis experienced systemic powerlessness. In this context, joining an armed squad was less about political conviction and more about immediate personal agency. Carrying a weapon completely inverted local power dynamics.

A firearm provided instant protection against routine harassment, demanded immediate deference from local elites, and offered a clear sense of identity in an environment devoid of economic opportunities. For many young recruits, the gun was an equalizer against structural humiliation, offering immediate authority in a world that had previously denied them basic dignity.

A critical distinction must therefore be drawn between external ideologues—who dominated the Central Committee and Political Bureau—and local Adivasi military leaders who emerged from the terrain. The most prominent example of the latter is Madvi Hidma, a Koya Adivasi from the Purvati village of Sukma who rose to command the PLGA's 1st Tactical Counter-Offensive Battalion and secured a seat on the Central Committee.

Unlike non-tribal leaders who viewed Bastar primarily as a strategic springboard for national revolution, Hidma's standing among local cadres derived from his deep roots in the region's cultural and physical landscape. His authority rested on his framing of the conflict as a direct, existential defense of *Jal*, *Jungle*, *Jameen* against corporate and state encroachment. For the local population, Hidma represented tribal military capability capable of standing up to outside forces, making his appeal personal, protective, and deeply tied to indigenous identity.

4. State Counter-Strategy, Security Consolidation, and the Mechanics of Surrender

4.1 Tactical Shifts: Forward Operating Bases and Specialized Local Units

Over the past decade, the central and state governments implemented a coordinated strategy designed to break the military capacity and financial networks of the insurgency. This shift moved away from large-scale, sweeping search operations toward a dense spatial consolidation grid.

The core of this strategy was the rapid deployment of Forward Operating Bases (FOBs) deep inside historic Maoist strongholds such as Abujmahar, the Chintalnar-Kistaram axis, and the Silger valley. These fortified camps, placed every few kilometers along planned road axes, served a dual purpose: they denied insurgents operational freedom and provided continuous security cover for civil engineering teams constructing all-weather highways.

Concurrently, the tactical balance on the ground shifted with the creation and expansion of specialized tactical units, most notably the District Reserve Guard (DRG). Composed predominantly of local tribal youth, including surrendered former Maoist cadres who possessed deep knowledge of the terrain, local dialects, and family networks, the DRG neutralized the intelligence advantage long held by guerrilla units.

To safeguard economic assets during this transition, the state government established the State Industrial Security Force (SISF)—a dedicated force modeled on central industrial security structures—specifically tasked with guarding mining sites, iron ore processing plants, rail links, and power grids from insurgent sabotage.

4.2 The Rehabilitation Framework and Socio-Political Surrender Dynamics

To complement military pressure, the Chhattisgarh government updated its Surrender and Rehabilitation Policy, offering clear off-ramps for active cadres. The framework provides immediate cash stipends, monthly subsistence allowances during transitional periods, vocational skill training, land allotments, and legal assistance for clearing pending warrants, alongside additional bounties for surrendered weapons.

This policy, combined with relentless tactical pressure from FOBs and DRG patrols, disrupted the command structures of several local guerrilla squads. For rank-and-file cadres faced with operational exhaustion and cut off from supply lines, surrender offered a viable path back to civilian life.

The influx of surrendered combatants has accelerated the decline of insurgent authority across South Bastar. Financially, it has severed the shadow taxation networks that previously targeted road contractors and transport operators. Socially, however, the return of former combatants into interior villages requires careful management. Reintegrating individuals who previously held coercive power back into agrarian tribal communities demands sustained conflict-resolution support to prevent old rivalries from turning into fresh local tensions.

5. Industrial Integration: Bastar as a Resource and Logistics Corridor

As security forces consolidated control over main transit routes, state planning shifted toward integrating Bastar into national industrial supply chains.

5.1 Infrastructure Expansion and Digital Administration

The physical transformation of Bastar relies on a series of major infrastructure projects aimed at cutting logistics costs for bulk raw materials while integrating local populations into formal administrative networks:

- **Logistics and Transit:** Modernization of National Highway 30 (NH-30) and the expansion of heavy-haul rail networks connecting Jagdalpur and Kirandul to the coastal port at Visakhapatnam have significantly increased mineral export capacity.
- **Targeted Regional Development:** Under civil infrastructure programs like Niyad Nellanar ("Your Good Village"), the state builds basic public facilities—such as primary health centers, schools, fair-price grain shops, and solar-powered water pumps—within a 5-kilometer radius of newly established security camps.
- **Digital Connectivity:** The construction of hundreds of telecom towers under the Ministry of Home Affairs' LWE-phase mobile project has brought cell coverage to previously isolated interior valleys. This digital grid allows for the direct transfer of welfare benefits into local bank accounts, cutting out traditional village-level middlemen.
- **Agro-Forestry Processing:** Complementing heavy mining, state agencies have established processing units for minor forest produce—including tamarind brick manufacturing, herbal medicine collection, and regional specialty agriculture like Bastar Coffee—to build formal market linkages for non-industrial rural households.

6. Critical Friction: Fifth Schedule Protections, Extraction, and Ecology

The rapid shift from a conflict zone to an industrial resource corridor presents major political, legal, and environmental challenges that must be addressed to ensure long-term peace.

6.1 The Legal Tension: Fifth Schedule, PESA, and Mineral Clearances

Bastar is a designated Fifth Schedule area under the Indian Constitution, which grants special administrative protections to tribal-majority regions to prevent land alienation and preserve indigenous self-governance. This protective architecture is bolstered by two key federal statutes:

1. **The Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA), 1996:** Mandates that local village assemblies (*Gram Sabhas*) must be consulted before land is acquired for development projects and gives them administrative authority over community resources.
2. **The Forest Rights Act (FRA), 2006:** Formally recognizes the individual and community forest rights of traditional forest-dwelling households over their ancestral lands.

A major point of friction in Bastar's contemporary political economy is the administrative process used to grant mineral leases and forest clearances for industrial projects. Critical scholars and local activists point out that the legal requirement for *Gram Sabha* consent under PESA is sometimes undermined during competitive auctions for mineral blocks.

In some instances, public hearings are held under heavy security presence far from the affected villages, or administrative procedures treat local consultations as mere paperwork rather than genuine opportunities for community veto. Overriding or bypassing *Gram Sabha* decisions creates deep resentment among Adivasi communities, threatening to reignite the very feelings of legal powerlessness that historically fuelled support for insurgency.

6.2 Primitive Accumulation and Labor Realities

From an economic perspective, converting Bastar into a resource corridor can lead to forms of primitive accumulation—where traditional communities lose direct access to their land and natural resources, receiving only limited monetary compensation in return.

While state reports emphasize economic growth and employment generation through skill development centers, the actual industrial labor market in mining belts often offers tribal workers precarious, low-wage contract jobs. Unskilled earthmoving or loading work at mine sites rarely replaces the long-term security provided by ancestral landholdings and open forest gathering.

To address this inequality, funds collected under the District Mineral Foundation (DMF)—a statutory trust funded by royalties paid by mining companies—must be managed with absolute transparency. Rather than spending DMF funds on urban civil projects in district headquarters like Jagdalpur, these resources should go directly into interior tribal hamlets to build clean drinking water systems, functional village clinics, and quality primary schools.

6.3 Ecological Degradation and River Basins

Expanding open-cast mining for iron ore and bauxite across dense forest tracts carries unavoidable ecological consequences. The removal of topsoil and the clearing of primary forest canopies reduce local biodiversity and diminish the availability of wild forest foods, medicinal plants, and *tendu* leaves that rural families rely on during lean agricultural months.

Furthermore, untreated mine runoff and heavy silt loads during the monsoon season threaten major river systems in the region, particularly the Indravati and Shankhini rivers. Red iron-ore silt has severely affected several local streams in Dantewada, rendering the water unfit for domestic use or agricultural irrigation. Protecting the long-term viability of Bastar's river basins and forests is essential not only for environmental conservation, but also for preserving the health and traditional livelihoods of the surrounding Adivasi communities.

7. Conclusion

Bastar is undergoing a profound structural transition. The combination of targeted counter-insurgency operations, expanding security networks, targeted welfare programs, and formal surrender policies has systematically dismantled the military stronghold once held by Left-Wing Extremism. As active conflict recedes, the state has moved quickly to build roads, expand communication networks, and integrate the region's immense mineral wealth into the national economy.

However, transforming Bastar from a conflict zone into a stable, prosperous region requires more than expanding mines, rail lines, and highways. True stability cannot be achieved through resource extraction alone. The long-term peace of the region depends on whether the state honors the constitutional promises made to its indigenous population. Protecting the legal authority of *Gram Sabhas* under PESA, respecting forest rights under the FRA, ensuring environmental protection, and making local Adivasi communities equal partners in regional development are essential steps to ensuring Bastar's transition leads to genuine, lasting human progress.

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