



# ISSUE BRIEF

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## The Unnoticed “Seeds” of Violence: Child Soldiers in Maoist Ranks



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In a 2018 report titled ‘Children in Armed Conflicts’, the United Nations Secretary-General under “Situations Not on the Agenda of the Security Council or Other Situations” mentioned the use of children as soldiers by the Naxalites in the Indian states of Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand. Although officially denied any relevance (claiming that India’s Naxal Movement is not an “armed conflict or of threat to maintenance of international peace and security”), the existence of child soldiers, their use and training has been recognised back at home time and again. In a written reply to the Unstarred Question Number 1605 in the Lok Sabha on 2 July 2019, the Minister of State for Home Affairs, Shri Jagdambika

*A child soldier is any person below the age of 18, who is recruited by an armed force or an armed group, in any capacity including as cooks, porters, informants, suicide bombers or for sexual exploitation. Minors who are trained for military purposes but not used in war are also categorised as child soldiers.*

### Key Points

- Recruitment of children as soldiers by the Left-wing Extremists is a serious National Security concern.
- Most Maoists leaders join the cadres as children and are ideologically indoctrinated. It is highly difficult to ascertain the number of such recruits.
- The children so recruited, lose the most crucial learning years of their life in insurgency, triggering the unending cycle of unemployment and grievances.
- A specific rehabilitation policy for children recruited as combatants must be framed at the National level.

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## The Unnoticed “Seeds” of Violence: ...

Pal, mentioned the reports of the Maoists inducting and using children in various capacities, apart from just imparting military training.

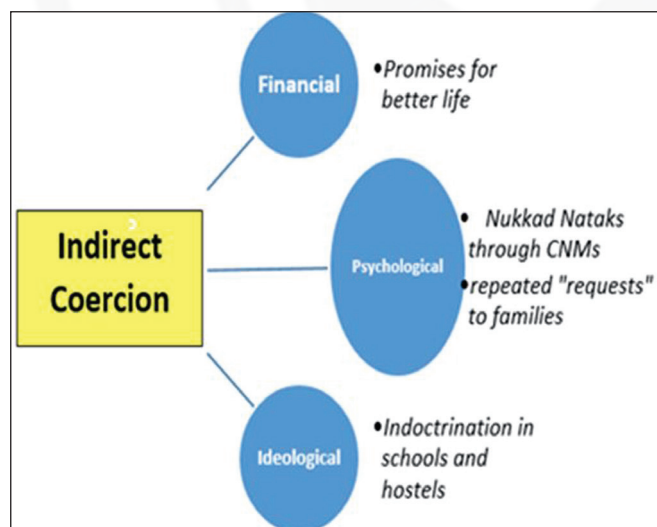
### Recruitment

Children are universally considered to be quick and efficient learners. Their young and impressionable minds are considered as easier to ideologically indoctrinate, and their growing physique as best suited to physically train. Several claims regarding the recruitment of minors by the Naxalites have surfaced since the time of the inception of the Communist Party of India (Maoist) in 2004. Most surrendered Maoist commanders too have confirmed that they had joined the Party while they were children, and had got promoted through the ranks thereafter. Cases reported in the past one decade regarding the same, both at local and international levels, have only added a new life to this ongoing discourse. While direct coercion might drive the “fish” away from its “water” (as in Jharkhand currently), as well as become a breeding ground for disloyal and insincere armed squads, indirect coercion works in their favour. Currently, if the Maoist means of recruitment of minors were to be summed up in two simple words, it can be

termed as “Indirect Coercion”, with thin government presence at the roots of this insurgency, acting as a primary driving force (Figure 1).

Children of ages between 6 and 12 years, often lured by promises of a better life devoid of their current sufferings, better food, etc., are driven to join the Naxal outfits. Besides this, the cultural-theatrical groups, called the Chetna Natya Mandali or Chaitanya Natya Manch (CNM), play a significant role in influencing minors to “voluntarily” become a part of the local cadres. The peppy music, fiery monologues, and performances by the CNM groups easily attract the impressionable minds of the children, who, many a times, find the idea of “revolution”, using arms and wearing uniforms, fascinating. Repeated “requests” by the Maoists to the parents of these minors to send them to join Maoist ranks are also not uncommon. These requests, although “requests”, generally carry a greater weightage due to the so-called ideological legitimacy they hold among the masses (for protecting their “*jal, jungle, zameen, and khaniij*”). A kind of fear for undesired repercussions, of being harmed physically or otherwise, is generated among the population in the event of not complying with the Maoists because of the power and influence derived from the ideological legitimacy they command. Seconding this, instances quoted in a report by the Human Rights Watch narrate how young boys agree to train in arms because they think they “would be beaten if he (they) didn’t”.<sup>1</sup>

But, it is indoctrination of ideology through schools and hostels that forms the most effective and preferred means of recruitment of minors. Citing the “Maoist threat” either genuinely or otherwise, although schools exist on paper, as well as on ground on many occasions, the absence of teachers is often comfortably used by the ultras to interact and influence these children. They use these schools as ready platforms for propagating



**Figure 1:** Indirect coercion being used as a means of recruitment

Source: Author’s representation of Maoist means of recruitment.

<sup>1</sup> Human Rights Watch, “Being Neutral is Our Biggest Crime and Naxalite Abuses in India’s Chhattisgarh State”, at <https://www.hrw.org/report/2008/07/14/being-neutral-our-biggest-crime/government-vigilante-and-naxalite-abuses-indias#e428b0>, 15 July, 2008, accessed on 25 August, 2019.



A photograph from 2013, where children in school uniforms can be seen holding a handmade Maoist banner supporting the Jantana Sarkars, or the parallel governments that are run by the Maoists in the affected districts of Chhattisgarh.

Source: ANI

the Maoist ideology under the pretext of imparting “education” (image above).

Interestingly, contrary to this, various human rights organisations and media houses, both nationally and internationally, have claimed the use of direct coercion by the Maoists. Reports of the abduction of minors from villages, sometimes to the extent of forcing the families to send their children to other states like Gujarat and Bihar to keep them out of Maoist reach, present a contradictory picture.<sup>2</sup> In personal conversations with this author, both scholars (citing the academic narrative) and the Central Armed Police Forces (CAPF) personnel (citing the government narrative) have negated this being the general truth, owing to its suicidal repercussions that might turn the very masses, the foundational support of the ultras, against them. With this context, it becomes worth questioning as to what then drives human rights organisations and media houses, at home and abroad, to defame an already officially outlawed armed group. The

<sup>2</sup> Child Soldiers International, “Lost Childhood: Caught in Armed Violence in Jharkhand”, Centre for Child Rights, 2016 at <http://haqrc.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/lost-childhood-caught-in-armed-violence-in-jharkhand.pdf>, accessed on 22 August 2019.

answer might lie in smaller sample sizes (in an adverse terrain both geographically and in terms of security) while conducting surveys and drawing subsequent conclusions, thus building a general narrative from specific cases. But, similar claims from organisations as reputed as the Asian Centre for Human Rights (India’s Child Soldiers, 2013), Child Soldiers International (Lost Childhood: Caught in the Armed Violence in Jharkhand, 2016), as well as the United Nations (Children in Armed Conflict, 2018), keeps the exact answer to this question rather blurred.

### Structures of Organisation of Child Recruits

Regarding structures of organisation of these recruits, children between the ages of 6 and 12 years are initially recruited as members of the Bal Sangams or the children’s associations. Gradually, they are “promoted” on the basis of skill and aptitude to Sangams (village associations), Jan Militias (People’s Army), and Chetna Natya Mandalis (Theatre-cultural groups (Figure 2)). While members of the Bal Sangams, the training of the recruits majorly comprises indoctrination of the Maoist ideology. Physical training includes stamina-building exercises and training in the use of non-lethal and traditional weapons including sticks, bows and arrows, etc. They are also actively engaged in propaganda through CNMs and similar groups. No arms’ training is given while recruits are members of

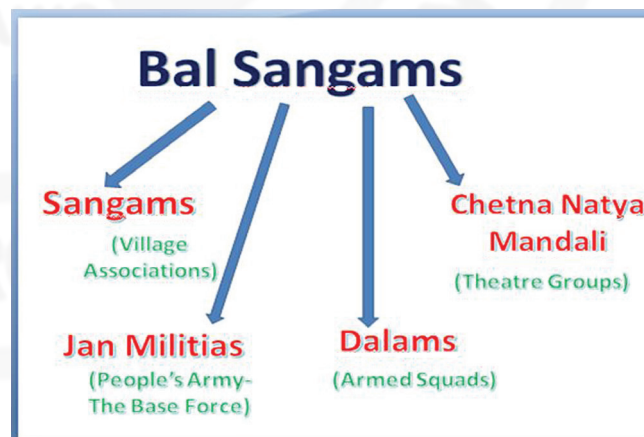


Figure 2: Author’s representation of structures of organisation of child recruits

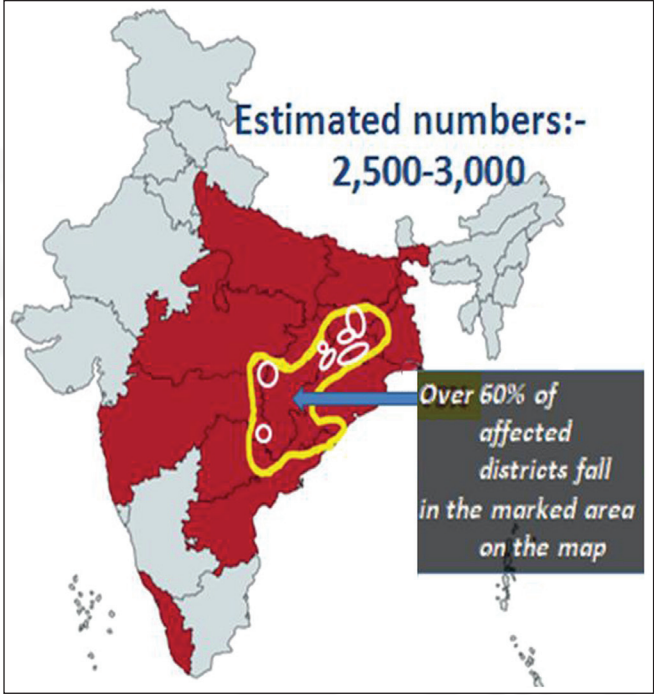
the Bal Sangams, and, therefore, they do not field lethal arms. On “promotion”, as members of the Sangams (village associations), Jan Militia (People’s Army), and Dalams (armed squads), weapons’ training is imparted but interestingly, weapons are not universally handed over. Weapons are considered to be the most important asset by the Maoists and they are handed only to the members of the Dalams and those of the Jan Militia that move along with the Dalams. All others, including the Bal Sangams, Sangams, and CNMs are only “trained” in the use of weapons and explosives, but never given one.

In the capacity of informants, the ultras take cue regarding their movement and tactics based on the intelligence gathered by these minors regarding the Security Forces. As porters and couriers, transport of material ranging from essentials to raw material for making explosives, etc., is handed as a mandate. Sentry duty for camps too is often handed to the older ones of the Bal Sangams. Being minors, a natural immunity from identification and apprehension by the SFs makes them a primary source of intelligence gathering and transporting material.

**Concerns**

While organisations like the Asian Centre for Human Rights (ACHR) among others claim the presence of over 2,500-3,000 child recruits, no official data for the same is available at home (Map 1). On the contrary, officials and SFs closely working in the affected areas cite the impossibility to ascertain any figures when it comes to child recruits. Natural immunity against identification and subsequent apprehension thus brings us to the major concerns regarding the recruitment, training, and subsequent use of children as soldiers.

Of the 90 affected districts across 11 Indian states, 60 percent lie in the area marked in yellow in Map 1. Of these, a majority of the recently reported cases come from the areas surrounding Tanda and Bagh rivers bordering Gondia (Maharashtra) and Balaghat (Madhya Pradesh); the Saranda forests on the Jharkhand-Odisha border; the Luggu forests near Bokaro district (Jharkhand);



**Map 1:** Areas that recorded instances of Maoist’s recruitment of children

Source: Collated data of recent cases marked by the author (see references); not to scale.

regions in Gumla, Latehar, and Lohardaga districts (Jharkhand); and parts of the Abhujmarh forests along the Chhattisgarh-Maharashtra border, as marked in white in Map 1. Closely examining the given context, two points appear worth consideration. One, the broad definition of child soldiers includes those recruited by armed groups in both military as well as non-military capacities. Two, all of these cases have been reported at the borders of the majorly affected region (marked in yellow) where the government control is comparatively more than that in the interiors.

According to the Census of 2011, the population of minors between 0 and 6 years of age in the Bastar district alone was 2,16,713. Assuming that most of them lived and are currently between 8 and 15 years of age, with over 2 lakh children in the district of Bastar alone, to say that only 2,500-3,000 children are recruited as child soldiers across the 60 affected districts, becomes a questionable figure. Last recorded in 2011, since Census

figures could be slightly outdated to bank our conclusions upon, it could be apt to consider the list of functional Eklavya Residential Model Schools (2017-18) by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs for a rough headcount of the students enrolled. In the 28 affected districts of just two majorly affected states (Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand), the number of minors enrolled equals 4,112 children. This, being the figure when numbers from other schools including the Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalaya (MHRD), Kasturba Gandhi Balika Mahavidyalya (MHRD), Ashram Schools (MoTA), Ramkrishna Mission Schools (one of them in the heart of the Maoist stronghold of Abhujmarh forests), and those of still not enrolled, have not been taken into account. In addition to the lack of information in terms of numbers, uniforms are generally only provided to Dalam members (armed squads), making identification of children recruited in non-military capacities near impossible.

Besides this, when recruited by the ultras, these children lose the most crucial years of their life amidst violence, thus making them lose out on attaining employable

skills. With lack of employable skills, despite possible employment options in the future, when these minors will grow up to add to the country's unemployed youth, the vicious cycle of violence, with its roots in deprivation, will get re-triggered.

Further, children, irrespective of whether they are victims or combatants, must be considered as those at the receiving end. The absence of a specific rehabilitation policy for child soldiers acts as a major concern that affects the child victims, as well as further deters the surrenders. The ideological indoctrination and violence that they grow up with influences their personality and psyche, sometimes to an irreparable extent. Due to the absence of any specific policy, child soldiers after being caught by the SFs are offered rehabilitation on a case-to-case basis. In many instances, they are simply let away with warnings, which raise possibilities of re-recruitment. In a similar incident narrated to this author by a CRPF personnel, a minor girl once let off due to lack of evidence as a suspected CNM member, turned out to be a Dalam member and was shot dead in a later

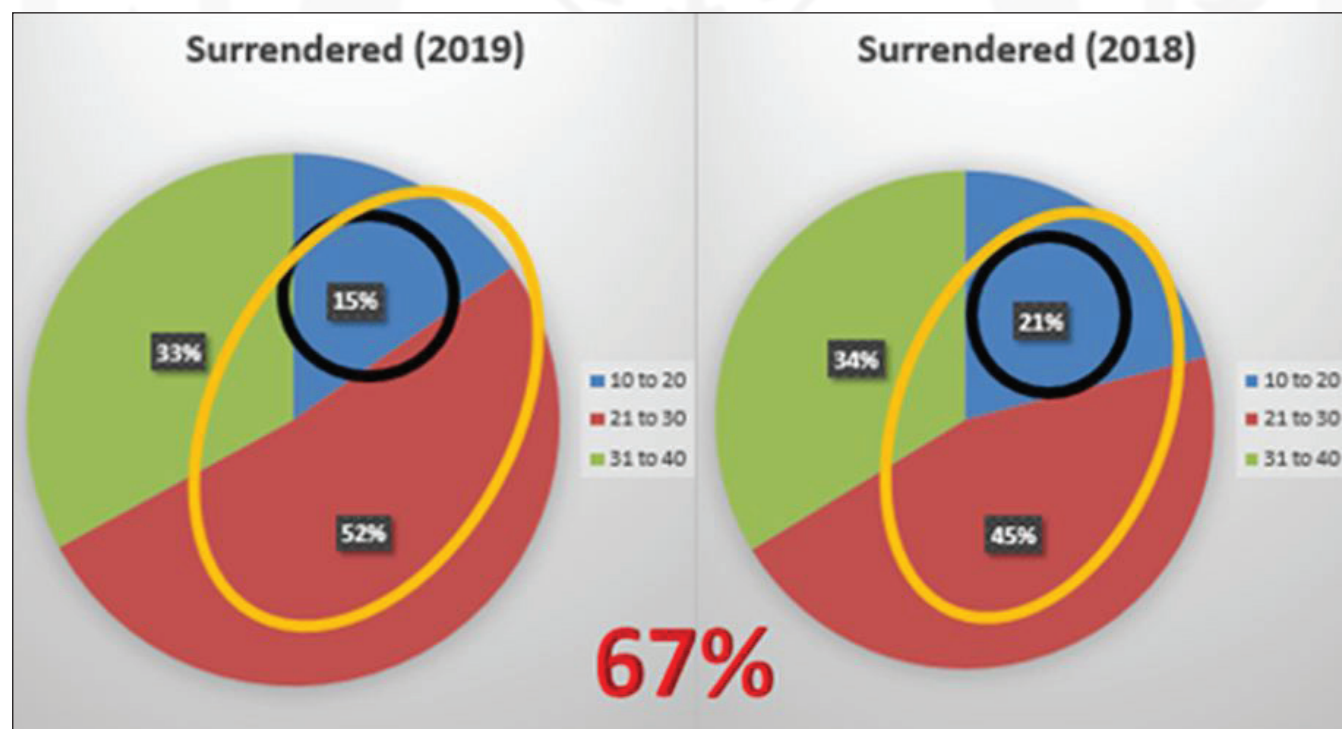


Figure 3: Data of surrenders in 2018 and 2019 (age-wise)

Source: CRPF Data.

ambush between the ultras and SFs.<sup>3</sup> Apart from this, since surrendered cadres are often used by the SFs as informants, as well as recruited by the local Police, in the absence of proper rehabilitation and security, the threat of Maoist violence on them and their family remains high, thus further deterring surrenders.

Mapping the figures of surrenders, we realise that over 15 percent and 21 percent of the total surrenders, according to the CRPF data, were between ages 10 and 20 in 2019 (till August) and 2018 (Figure 3). While these are certainly significant numbers, two things need to be emphasised. One, it must be understood that this is just the tip of the iceberg. The fact remains, that despite being caught, most minor surrenders are not recorded as they are let off with mild warnings. Two, considering the latent width of the pie indicating surrenders between ages 10 and 20 years, 10 years from now, owing to the untraceable nature of this section of the Naxal cadres, when this pie shifts to next pie indicating surrenders between ages 20 and 30 years, the threat starts appearing more real. Additionally, given that some Maoist cadres join the ranks as children, the collective pie width of surrenders between ages 10 and 30 years, adding up to a figure of roughly 67 percent (exclusive of the latent width of the “10-20” pie) raises further concerns.

**Deduced Recommendations**

Based on the author’s research and analysis of the data procured, it is emphasised that the most preferred and lucrative platforms for the Maoists to interact with children and indirectly coerce them into joining Maoist ranks are schools and hostels. Unattended by designated teachers on many occasions, and on others despite their presence, the Maoists visit these schools and hostels. While we have improved on our fortification of police stations and infrastructural projects, to ensure limiting contact of Maoists with children, residential schools with well-guarded facilities should be encouraged, and gradually made mandatory, if and when feasible. The teachers/wardens should be encouraged to peacefully

<sup>3</sup> Personal Interview with a CRPF Officer on 29 August, 2019, at the CRPF Headquarters.

resist the visits of Naxals to their premises. They should also be encouraged to take the help of residents towards this end.

A specific rehabilitation policy needs to be put in place to cater to the standard needs of child victims with uniformity, thus ensuring their re-integration with the mainstream. This could help in triggering economic and social development, thus eroding the root cause of the insurgency, as well as ensuring their protection from Maoist threats in the future, thus curbing future lines of supply for the Maoists cadre replenishment.

**Deduced Recommendations**

- Encourage (mandatory, if feasible) **residential schools.**
- Focus on ensuring **security** of schools, hostels: devoid of Maoist influence.
- A **specific rehab policy** for surrendered/victimised children.
- Ensure **anonymity** while filing FIRs, if any.

**Figure 4:** Bulleted representation of deduced recommendations

Overall, Left-wing Extremism is certainly a politico-socio-economic problem that requires strong governance to address public grievances. The SFs can at best manage the situation, but it will take a strong political will to bring it to a final resolution. Through this paper, this author only intends to throw light on a crucial aspect of this insurgency, through a futurist lens, which if not given the required attention, might prolong the ongoing insurgency. While the government clamp-down on the Naxal cadres coupled with reportedly low recruitment rates is a jubilant fact, this untraced, untracked group of child combatants, if not managed with concern, could bring us back in time, fighting the same battles we are victoriously celebrating today. The author intends to emphasise on the need to consider

the latent capabilities of the outlawed armed group, in the face of their untraced and untracked child recruits, look at the current situations with at least a decade-ahead approach and work towards limiting the Maoist insurgency till it reaches its political resolution.

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