Original Article
ISSN (Online): 3107-6408

ShodhVichar: Journal of Media and Mass Communication
July-December 2025 1(2), 222–230

COMMUNICATION ECOSYSTEMS IN CONFLICT ZONES: A SURVEY OF STATE: TRIBAL DYNAMICS AND INSURGENT RHETORIC IN CHHATTISGARH

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Received 05 June 2024
Accepted 21 July 2025
Published 30 August 2025

DOI
10.29121/ShodhVichar.v1.i2.2025.143

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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ABSTRACT

In asymmetric internal security conflicts, the struggle for physical control over geography is inherently intertwined with the contest over the communicative sphere. In the extremist-affected tribal regions of Chhattisgarh, particularly across the Bastar division, indigenous Adivasi communities are situated at the nexus of competing message flows generated by the Indian democratic state and Left-Wing Extremist (LWE) guerrilla formations. This survey paper provides a comprehensive, state-of-the-art review of academic literature produced between 2021 and 2025 regarding conflict communication, strategic messaging, and subaltern reception. Synthesizing insights from mass communication theories (Framing, Reception Theory, Two-Step Flow, and Cultural Hermeneutics), the paper evaluates the structural mechanisms of state civic outreach, insurgent vernacular mobilization, tribal everyday resistance through calculated silence, and the hazards confronting vernacular journalistic intermediaries. Finally, the paper articulates a taxonomy of conflict communication channels, identifies persistent research gaps, and models a robust methodological blueprint for empirical field surveys in conflict-affected regions.

Keywords: Conflict Communication, Left-Wing Extremism, State–Tribal Relations, Strategic Messaging, Chetna Natya Manch, Bastar, Reception Theory, Subaltern Silence

1. INTRODUCTION

Internal security challenges in developing democracies often defy purely militaristic or law-and-order characterizations. In central India—most prominently within the southern districts of Chhattisgarh—the protracted Maoist insurgency represents not merely a confrontation between armed guerrilla cadres and security apparatuses, but an intensive semiotic and discursive conflict waged across the indigenous information environment Kumar and Sen (2024). Over five decades after the emergence of the Naxalbari movement, modern governance frameworks have deployed extensive economic packages, constitutional protections, and targeted counter-insurgency initiatives. Yet, the state frequently struggles to build normative

trust and sustained communicative rapport with tribal populations residing in the forested tracts of Bastar, Dantewada, Bijapur, Sukma, and Narayanpur.

The core problem lies within the communicative process itself. Communication in conflict environments is never a neutral conduit of factual data; rather, it constitutes a contested arena where political power, cultural identity, and ideological legitimacy are negotiated. While the state deploys Civic Action Programs (CAP), multi-crore development rhetoric, and surrender policies to invite tribal subjects into the mainstream democratic fold, the Communist Party of India (Maoist) leverages deep-rooted vernacular cultural idioms, anti-imperialist framing, and local grievances over Jal, Jangal, and Jameen (water, forest, and land) to maintain its operational sanctuary Roy and Mukherjee (2023). Trapped between these two coercive communication streams, indigenous communities experience severe cognitive dissonance, physical peril, and communicative alienation Das (2022).

This survey paper systematically examines the emerging body of multidisciplinary scholarship published between 2021 and 2025. It integrates theoretical frameworks from Mass Communication, Political Sociology, and Subaltern Studies to analyze how messages are designed, disseminated, and decoded in extremist-affected areas, offering scholars and policy designers a unified analytical foundation.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS IN CONFLICT COMMUNICATION

To analyze the communicative dynamics between the state, insurgent actors, and indigenous communities, recent scholarship draws upon several foundational and contemporary communication models:

- **Lasswell's Transmission Model versus Dialogic Paradigms:** Early administrative interventions assumed Harold Lasswell's linear communication model ('Who says What in Which Channel to Whom with What Effect'). Recent critical communication scholars argue that treating indigenous communities as passive endpoints in a one-way transmission process guarantees communicative failure Mishra and Mohapatra (2022). Dialogic paradigms, rooted in Paulo Freire's dialogism, demand co-equal meaning-making and mutual recognition.
- **Stuart Hall's Encoding/Decoding and Reception Theory:** Hall's model is essential for unpacking tribal responses to state and insurgent messages. State apparatuses encode messages under a 'dominant-hegemonic code' of national sovereignty and industrial development. Maoist cadres encode messages under an 'oppositional code' of revolutionary struggle. Tribal recipients, however, overwhelmingly exhibit a 'negotiated reading' or strategic non-alignment, interpreting external rhetoric through the lens of physical survival and ancestral preservation Patel (2024).
- **Agenda-Setting and Framing Theory:** State messaging frames the conflict around criminality, lawlessness, and anti-developmental extremism, whereas insurgent narratives frame the encounter around corporate resource extraction, systemic tribal exploitation, and military oppression Verma and Tiwari (2022). Framing contests dictate which attributes of reality are highlighted and which structural realities are obscured.

- **Two-Step Flow of Communication:** In media-dark, forested geographies, information rarely flows directly from mass media to individuals. It is filtered through informal opinion leaders—including traditional village headmen (Majhi, Patel), village elders, schoolteachers, and local tribal stringers Dwivedi and Srivastava (2024).

3. THE STATE STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION ARCHITECTURE

3.1. MODALITIES OF OUTREACH: PARAMILITARY CAP AND COMMUNITY POLICING

State communication in extremist-affected pockets has progressively shifted from passive administrative notifications to proactive, militarized civic outreach. The primary vehicle for field-level engagement is the Civic Action Program (CAP), executed by the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF), Border Security Force (BSF), and local district police reserves Sharma and Rath (2022). Through CAP initiatives, security apparatuses distribute medical care, sports equipment, agricultural tools, and domestic appliances. Scholarly evaluations demonstrate that these programs function as non-verbal communicative gestures designed to signal state benevolence and dismantle the militaristic, punitive image of armed forces.

3.2. PERSUASIVE FRAMING AND SURRENDER-CUM-REHABILITATION DRIVES

Complementing welfare events, state agencies run intensive propaganda campaigns centered on surrender and rehabilitation policies. Through visual banners, hoarding boards, wall writings, and audio-visual vans, the state advertises financial rewards, housing grants, and formal criminal amnesty for underground cadres who renounce violence Bhatia (2023). State media systematically highlights former cadres who have integrated into mainstream society, contrasting civic security against the hardships of guerrilla life in the jungle.

3.3. CRITICAL BOTTLENECKS: LINGUISTIC DISTANCE AND INSTITUTIONAL PATERNALISM

Despite substantial budget allocations, recent critical scholarship identifies severe communicative bottlenecks. First and foremost is the issue of linguistic alienation: administrative notices and security handbills are overwhelmingly published in Sanskritized Standard Hindi or English, completely ignoring the grammatical and idiomatic reality of Gondi (spoken by over 60% of Bastar's tribal population), Dorli, and Halbi Tete (2021). Second, Kujur (2021) observes that state communications frequently adopt an infantilizing, paternalistic posture. Tribals are addressed as gullible victims misled by outside extremists, which devalues their historical memory, customary autonomy, and sophisticated critique of extractive capitalism.

4. INSURGENT COUNTER-COMMUNICATION AND VERNACULAR MOBILISATION

4.1. FOLK ART, ORALITY, AND CHETNA NATYA MANCH (CNM)

In sharp contrast to the state's institutionalized and bureaucratic materials, the CPI (Maoist) maintains an agile, vernacular cultural apparatus. Foremost among its communication instruments is the Chetna Natya Manch (CNM), the revolutionary cultural wing dedicated to staging performances in remote hamlets Pathak (2022). CNM performers employ traditional folk musical instruments, indigenous metres, and local tribal dialects to sing ballads of land struggle, institutional oppression, and tribal martyrs. By embedding revolutionary theory into traditional oral forms, the insurgents achieve immediate affective resonance among illiterate or semi-literate forest dwellers Roy and Mukherjee (2023).

4.2. VERNACULAR PRINT PROPAGANDA AND SPATIAL TAGGING

To govern the social space, insurgents maintain a stencilled and cyclostyled print publicity machinery. Red banners, stenciled pamphlets, and handwritten notices pasted on roadside trees or culverts serve as tactical communication media Chakraborty (2022). These notices declare hartals (general strikes), broadcast verdicts from Jan Adalats (people's courts), issue warnings against suspected police informers, and condemn corporate mining initiatives. Through these highly visible spatial tags, the insurgents establish symbolic territorial control and remind the local populace of their omnipresent intelligence apparatus.

4.3. COMPARATIVE TAXONOMY OF COMMUNICATION CHANNELS

To structure the divergent communicative approaches operating in the conflict zone, Table 1 categorizes the primary channels, underlying strategies, target audiences, and observable limitations documented across recent academic literature.

Actor	Primary Channels	Key Strategic Objective	Dominant Language / Form	Primary Systemic Weakness
State Apparatus (Paramilitary / Police)	Civic Action Programs, medical camps, sports distributions, surrender brochures.	De-legitimize insurgents; project welfare benevolence; gather actionable intelligence.	Standard Hindi / English; formal print leaflets; audio-visual vans.	Linguistic disconnect; paternalistic framing; transactional trust.
State Administration (Civilian / PR)	Public relations hoardings, newspaper notices, official welfare	Demonstrate infrastructure progress (schools, roads); promote constitutional loyalty.	Administrative Hindi; institutional government gazettes and posters.	Top-down dissemination; urban bias; bureaucratic opacity in forest hamlets.

	beneficiary lists.			
CPI (Maoist) Cultural Wing (CNM)	Live musical ballads, street theatre, participatory folk dances, vernacular poetry.	Emotional mobilization; ideological framing around forest rights (Jal, Jangal, Jameen).	Indigenous Gondi, Dorli, Halbi; traditional tribal musical rhythms.	Subsumes customary traditions under rigid party ideology; ideological dogmatism.
CPI (Maoist) Underground Org.	Stencilled circulars, handwritten red banners, press statements, Jan Adalat rulings.	Enforce behavioral compliance; announce bandhs; execute psychological warfare.	Colloquial Hindi and Gondi; printed red notices on arterial paths.	Coercive messaging; mortal threats alienate moderate tribal strata.
Vernacular Media & Intermediaries	Regional Hindi dailies, digital WhatsApp news bulletins, community stringer reports.	Bridge communication between remote villages, state officials, and general public.	Local colloquial Hindi, mixed tribal dialects, visual video bytes.	Caught in crossfire; criminalization of stringers; censorship from both sides.

5. TRIBAL RECEPTION AND SUBALTERN HERMENEUTICS

5.1. THE DOUBLE-BIND: CAUGHT IN THE INFORMATIONAL CROSSFIRE

A central theme across recent field investigations is the acute vulnerability experienced by tribal communities caught in the crosshairs of conflicting communication mandates Markam and Sahu (2023). Attending a security force outreach camp or accepting civic gifts immediately makes a villager susceptible to Maoist accusations of being a police spy (gopniya sainik), often resulting in torture or public execution during nocturnal Jan Adalats. Conversely, refusing to attend civic events or failing to report insurgent movements to security posts attracts state suspicion, leading to unlawful detention and interrogation under stringent special security statutes. This creates an existential double-bind where every communicative act carries mortal consequences Das (2022).

5.2. STRATEGIC SILENCE AND FEIGNED IGNORANCE AS WEAPONS OF THE WEAK

Faced with overwhelming asymmetrical force from both directions, indigenous villagers develop sophisticated counter-communicative strategies. Xaxa (2023) and Patel (2024) document that tribal subjects frequently mobilize deliberate silence,

calculated ambiguity, and feigned ignorance during formal interrogations and public interactions. This performance of submissive compliance serves as an indispensable shield. Far from indicating cognitive deficiency or an inability to comprehend political discourse, subaltern silence functions as an active survival mechanism and everyday resistance against external surveillance.

5.3. THE CRISIS OF MEDIATION: VERNACULAR JOURNALISTS AND CIVIL SOCIETY

Independent channels of mediation are critical for maintaining functional state-citizen dialogue in conflict-ridden peripheries. However, recent scholarship highlights the near-total collapse of safe mediation corridors in southern Chhattisgarh (Dwivedi and Srivastava 88-104). Grassroots stringers and vernacular journalists operate under intense structural hazards. Security establishments regularly demand that local reporters reproduce official press statements concerning encounters and surrenders without verification, treating critical investigative reportage as sympathetic to extremism. Simultaneously, insurgent commanders brand independent journalists as state collaborators whenever coverage highlights Maoist extortion, killings of innocents, or infrastructure sabotage.

At the same time, the institutional space occupied by civil society organizations, independent legal aid groups, and human rights defenders has severely contracted Banerjee (2023). Strict statutory regulations, foreign funding restrictions, and persistent state suspicion have dismantled the informal communicative buffers that historically alerted the state to indigenous humanitarian crises. Without credible civil society intermediaries, communication degenerates into an unmediated struggle between armed force and insurgent propaganda.

6. OPEN CHALLENGES AND CRITICAL RESEARCH GAPS

While existing literature provides valuable sociological and strategic insights into Left-Wing Extremism, several major empirical and theoretical deficits persist:

1) **Under-Theorization of Grassroots Reception:** Existing research heavily emphasizes macro-level security doctrines or insurgent political theory, neglecting granular, empirical reception audits that examine how Adivasi women, youth, and traditional elders decode specific messages.
2) **Absence of Comparative Linguistic Audits:** There is a lack of rigorous semiotic and content-analytic research that directly compares state publicity handbills against Maoist revolutionary poetry across indigenous dialects (Gondi, Halbi) to determine rhetorical efficacy.
3) **Neglect of Digital and Hybrid Information Flows:** As mobile tower penetration expands across Bastar under rural digital connectivity drives, smartphones and encrypted chat apps are transforming information dissemination. Research on digital rumor propagation and WhatsApp propaganda in tribal corridors remains in its infancy.
4) **Disconnect Between Research and Actionable Communication Policy:** Most academic critique stops at deconstructing state failures

without formulating concrete, culturally grounded, and linguistically competent policy frameworks to reform administrative outreach.

7. METHODOLOGICAL BLUEPRINT FOR FIELDWORK AND SURVEY VALIDATION

To rigorously resolve these scholarly gaps, future empirical research must deploy a mixed-method, multi-stakeholder survey design across the conflict landscape of Chhattisgarh. Based on the synoptic objectives, the field investigation should be structured across four purposively selected districts reflecting varying degrees of conflict intensity and communicative infrastructure: Bastar (semi-urban administrative hub), Dantewada (resource-rich, moderately militarized), Bijapur (high conflict intensity, dense forest coverage), and Sukma (remote cross-border tri-junction).

The methodological schema integrates three core empirical instruments:

- **Semi-Structured Tribal Questionnaires and In-Depth Interviews:** Administered across stratified cohorts (stratified by gender, age, literacy, distance from security camps, and traditional leadership roles) using bilingual native enumerators proficient in Gondi and Halbi to overcome the barrier of silence.
- **Content and Semiotic Archival Analysis:** Systematic qualitative and quantitative textual coding of state publicity materials, police handouts, Maoist stenciled pamphlets, and CNM audio cassettes collected through police archives, community libraries, and local press clubs.
- **Expert Key-Informant Interviews (KIIs):** In-depth dialogic engagements with civil society advocates, vernacular journalists, district magistrates, and paramilitary outreach commanders to triangulate stakeholder perceptions and identify structural communication bottlenecks.

8. CONCLUSION

Resolving the protracted conflict in Chhattisgarh requires far more than physical territorial reclamation; it necessitates dismantling the communicative chasm separating the democratic state from its indigenous citizens. As this survey paper has demonstrated, current state communication mechanisms often falter due to institutional paternalism, linguistic disconnect, and transactional civic action models, while insurgent counter-communication continues to exploit vernacular cultural idioms despite its coercive undertones. Meaningful reconciliation is impossible as long as tribal communities remain trapped in an informational crossfire where speaking risks execution and silence signifies alienation. By transiting from coercive, top-down propaganda to a culturally resonant, dialogic communication policy rooted in indigenous languages and constitutional respect, the Indian democratic state can genuinely bridge the divide and foster lasting democratic peace in the heart of central India.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

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