



APPRAISAL

## Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy

R.N. Kao happily embraced the life of a recluse that accompanied his business of espionage

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*"R.N. Kao is the most remarkable spy in the history of modern India. If not for his contribution to India's formidable RAW, South Asia's geographic, economic and political landscape would have been markedly different."*

—Sri Lanka's Rohan Gunaratna, one of the few journalists to interview the former RAW chief.

When a motley group of old friends, many of them former spooks, met last weekend at Delhi's Nigambodh Ghat cremation grounds to pay their homage to a former colleague, there were none of the trappings of a VIP funeral that the Capital accords to much lesser men. Instead, the gathering was enveloped in a sombre silence which stemmed from the realisation that in the death of Rameshwar Nath Kao, one of the most daunting yet little-known period of India's undercover history had just come to an end.

In the years following the wars with China in 1962 and with Pakistan in 1965, when realtime foreign intelligence became a political necessity, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, who had then also begun tightening her grip on the Congress party, bifurcated the Intelligence Bureau (IB) in 1968 to form the Research and Analysis Wing, better known as RAW. Its mandate: monitor the world in general and south Asia in particular. And in this Mrs G chose Kao as her eyes and ears.

He was a natural choice because he was handpicked by Jawaharlal Nehru himself, with whom he travelled abroad frequently. Kao had proved his mettle in Ghana, where he had set up an intelligence agency at the request of President Kwame Nkrumah, and had worked closely with the Chinese to merit a letter of recommendation from Zhou En Lai. In the 'Chinese Princess' case, he, along with the British and the Chinese, had investigated circumstances leading to the crash of a plane carrying Chinese delegates to the Bandung Conference of 1956. Zhou was expected to be on board.

He took over RAW at a time when things were beginning to hot up in the subcontinent. His tenure, which began in 1968, lasted for nearly a decade and marked the closest association that an Indian prime minister has ever had with the country's intelligence chief. He had unlimited access to Indira Gandhi. She reposed complete faith in him. "Normally, Kao's was the last appointment of the day with Mrs Gandhi, when all her other engagements were finished," remembers a politician close to the Gandhi family.

Towards the end of the 1960s, when it gradually became clear that East Pakistan was willing to sever all links with Rawalpindi, those meetings became more and more frequent. Recalls long-time Kao associate Victor Longer: "Intelligence is the only government business that depends upon the spoken word. Sometimes you can understand signs and body language. Kao had that rapport with Mrs Gandhi." The pmo's inner group of Kashmiri advisors D.P. Dhar, P.N. Haksar and T.N. Kaul now had another Kashmiri, Kao, for company.

While what transpired at the meetings can now only be a matter of conjecture, Kao's own team, notably Shankaran Nair and current Jammu and Kashmir governor Gary Saxena, sized up the emerging scenario in what is now Bangladesh with precision. What was worked out was not just the larger picture but the little nuts and bolts—contingency plans and micro details. The idea of India training and equipping the freedom fighters of Mukti Bahini was evolved meticulously.

Indian operatives would get into East Pakistan, arm the local population and capitalise on the frustrations brewing within. Ashok Raina, in his book *Inside RAW*, writes: "Another RAW assessment sent to the prime minister spelt out the need for surgical intervention for the reports that came in gave positive indications that Pakistan was preparing for war. RAW received the green signal. RAW established guerrilla training camps along the border and began to train an illegal army."

According to Gunaratna, the Bangladesh operation took place in two phases: covert subversion and military intervention. "Phase one was coordinated by Kao and phase two by Manekshaw, both reporting directly to Indira Gandhi," he said.

Kao can also largely be credited for merging Sikkim into India in 1973 as its 22nd state. It was he who predicted and identified the fact that the merger must be effected before other competing interests like China moved in. Delhi had publicly acknowledged the good work done by RAW at that point. Some analysts say Kao also had a substantial role in arming Tamil guerrillas in the late seventies and eighties and played a pivotal role in Sri Lankan affairs, even though he was no longer the hands-on man.

When Morarji Desai's government came to power after the Emergency, Kao was under no illusion about how the new set of politicians—who had publicly attacked Indira Gandhi for spying on them—would react to his presence. He left quietly only to return when Indira made a comeback in 1980. He worked as a security advisor to both Indira and Rajiv Gandhi. Reminisces former chairman of Joint Intelligence Committee K.N. Daruwala: "His contacts the world over, particularly in Asia—Afghanistan, Iran, China, you name it—were something else. He could move things with just one phone call. He was a team leader who rode out notorious inter-departmental and inter-service rivalries, which is commonplace in India."

A fiercely private man, Kao was rarely seen in public. He knew too much to make a public statement or write a book. Some attribute this to a life devoted to adventure and espionage which made it very difficult for him to mingle publicly. He was a recluse leading a heavily guarded life in his Delhi's Vasant Vihar bungalow. Friends recall the tastefully done up Gandhara paintings in his house as much as his keen and sharp intellect. The only pity, they say, is no one is known to have tapped Kao's rich experience at a time when India faces the worst kind of terrorist violence.

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