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The unknown Maoist



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Here he is, the school teacher-like man in a white shirt, his face hidden behind a scarf, a gun hanging from his shoulder.

The hidden face of the media-savvy and accessible Maoist guerrilla spokesman Koteswar Rao, also called Kishenji, became a symbol of the unknown Maoist — the guerrilla fighting a faceless, faraway battle for 42 years in the jungles of India, who this year finally acquired a mainstream, middle-class-living-room audience.

Journalists were invited to middle-of-the-night press conferences in the middle of nowhere. Kishenji gave interviews on camera. Suddenly the Maoist rebel had a voice.

In some ways, it was the audacious march into TV screens of a rebellion that few urban Indians relate to, or care to know more about. After being a poor cousin insurgency for more than four decades, the Maoist movement seeped this year into the national consciousness. Films are being made on the rebels. Books are being written. Urban Indians are curious about the Naxalites and what their movement seeks. Suddenly it's not a nation mesmerised only with Kashmir.

All that is set to bring a greater sense of transparency, and accountability, regarding what goes on in these forgotten lands. Governance as an issue will likely not be brushed aside as it has been, using the alibi of insurgency. Greater attention will be paid to human rights excesses by the police and paramilitary. And as more journalists travel to these inaccessible areas to witness the truth for themselves, NGOs could perhaps temper their sweeping rhetoric — sometimes not based on facts — into a more constructive campaign that doesn't just survive on negativism.

The year also marked a turning point in India's engagement with the insurgency and the rebels' own tactics. Rebel attacks acquired a new audacity, pushing the envelope on how far they could dare

government forces. The Maoists hijacked train passengers, beheaded a police officer, abducted another and held a middle-of-the-night press conference for chaperoned journalists in remote West Bengal to release him. Most recently, they began burning vehicles and destroying property to secure the release of two activists allegedly detained by police.

After looking the other way for years, India's security establishment, traditionally obsessed only with the now-waning insurgency in Kashmir, decided to take the Maoists head on. A nationally coordinated offensive was planned this year, stretching over the next five years and beyond, involving the police and paramilitary units and greater coordination between states.

All that national attention could begin to bring some change in the hubs of rebellion, India's richest lands where its poorest people live. Because otherwise, here is how it works: an undersecretary from the Ministry of Home Affairs was in Dantewada, Chhattisgarh's rebel hub, in October, tasked with helping find ways to deal with insurgency. He flew in a chopper from the state capital of Raipur, had lunch at a police campus, admonished local police officers and flew back. "He wants to understand insurgency? Let him come with me into the jungle," a young officer said, outraged.

Out there in the forests, though, an undersecretary in the government of India would be a rarity. Even a block development officer, the person running the lowest rungs of governance, has not been seen for decades. So in the villages, the dispossessed millions of other India are hoping that the new faces that the new year brings to their villages — whether soldiers or government officials — will help ease their crushed lives.

Or else, there is always the faceless Maoist to turn to.

<http://www.hindustantimes.com/The-unknown-Maoist/H1-Article1-490600.aspx>