# Who painted my money white?

# BOOK **1** of the **MONEY** SERIES

# Who painted my money white?

When greed drives everything else and everything has a price

A work of fiction

by

Sree Iyer

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events, locales, and incidents are either the products of the author’s imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

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## Cast of characters

### Bureaucracy

**Amarnath Verma** – National Security Advisor. Retired Indian Police Service Officer with a James Bond like reputation. Trusted by Prime Minister Jadeja.

**M K (Mike) Srinivasan** – Mike as he is affectionately called, chose Intelligence as his field of operations, and runs it with an iron hand, brooking no counter views to his own, leading to some major debacles in the collection of intelligence.

**Deepak Masani** – A member of the Indian Revenue Service (IRS), he is entrusted with the procurement of Currency Printing Machines. An honest officer forced to do dishonest things; he ends up revealing a top secret that endangers national security.

### Politicians

**Prafulla Prakash** – Powerful politician, a fixer who firmly believes that everything and everyone has a price. A lawyer by profession. Hates to be called by his initials.

**Fali Mistry** – Last of a dying breed, an honest politician, who walks the fine line between truth and discretion. Trusted by the treacherous lot and often their go-to guy when an appearance of honesty is needed.

**Mailapore Damodaran** – Smooth, suave, and sophisticated, this white khadi politician from Chennai can charm anyone to his bed. Often ragged by his nickname Maida, he thinks his life purpose is to one-up his perceived rival, Dalda.

**Dalpat Dalvi** – Smooth and sly, Dalpat can match Maida manoeuvre for manoeuvre, always trying to out beat him but often comes up short. Called Dalda and for good reason. He very much lives up to his oily nickname.

**Biplab (Bob) Banerjee** – Born Biplab Kumar Bandopadhyay, he progressively westernized his name, eventually calling himself Bob, when he became the External Affairs Minister. Also called Boom-boom Banerjee behind his back by his cabinet colleagues, for his booming voice.

**Chennakesavan Krishnan** – Conscientious and careful with his words and deeds, he is referred to as Careful Krishnan by his colleagues in the Parliament. Studious with a penchant to take any issue to its logical conclusion, he instils fear in the hearts of his adversaries.

**Santhana Gopal** – Powerful politician from Kerala, he owns a series of colleges and newspapers/ television channels. Considered an invaluable asset of the Freedom Party to keep the main adversary in Kerala on their toes. Made his money creating mega serials, thereby earning him the sobriquet Saga Gopal.

**Harish Gopal** – Does not realize that he has hit middle age. Still chases every skirt in town and has links to the underworld. Moves money through them out to Dubai and is tasked with a major operation that would cause trouble for both him and his famous father later.

**Jagat Dhillon** – Prime Minister of the Freedom Party. Underestimated for his political acumen and overestimated for his technical prowess.

**Dipika Sharma** – The President of the Freedom Party and the one with the real power even though Dhillon is the Prime Minister.

**Gulab Sharma** – Son of Dipika Sharma and the presumed successor (at least in the mind of Dipika) to the Freedom Party.

**Govindan Ramaswamy** – Scrupulously honest, this indefatigable fighter against corruption decides to take on the government of Jagat Dhillon.

**Ram Chandra Pal** –A powerful Dalit leader from Bihar, who for a brief period presided over the Freedom Party, only to be dumped in an unceremonious manner.

**Maker Funtoosh Wirewala** – Pronounced Makar. Flamboyant and free-spirited, he went to all the right schools and colleges. Known more for his bombastic use of the Queen’s English and his sexploits.

**Hasmukh Jadeja** – They called him the man with a Midas touch, who could transform a desert state into a land of opportunity. He created a miracle from the ashes of a quake-prone state for which he was awarded the ultimate prize.

**Kapil Pandya** – Hasmukh’s able lieutenant. An avid chess player, he approaches politics too like a chess game and is usually four moves ahead of his opponent. An equal contributor to Hasmukh’s Midas touch.

### Intelligence Bureau

**Karan Dixit** – Born leader, smart, shrewd, and articulate with a penchant for languages. Speaks Urdu, Farsi, Arabic, and many Indian languages fluently, accent and all. Leader of the mission and ace solver of the Rubik’s cube.

**Priya Menon** – A striking beauty, intelligent and quick witted. Proficient at handling weapons and can go head-to-head with men on just about any physical exercise.

### ISI

**Pervez Pasha** – Head of ISI’s Covert Action Division. He could adapt to changing situations that blew across the politics of Pakistan and always landed on his feet. Mentor of Javed Bhatti.

**Javed Bhatti** – The kingpin of Operation BreakIndia. Smart, talented and tough, he has the reputation of thinking on his feet and getting out of sticky situations with ease. One of the best operatives in the organisation.

**Rehman Khan** - A chemical and poison expert. He was educated in England and then moved to Dubai to work.

### Others

**Pir Mohammad** – Rabid preacher based in Malappuram, advocating Love Jihad.

**Ramesh Badri** – A Chartered Accountant by profession, is hired by a politician to ensure smooth distribution of fake currency.

## Prologue

The Freedom Party office was located adjacent to the residence of its President, Dipika Sharma. While a new coalition government under the stewardship of Prime Minister Jagat Dhillon was sworn-in again, the way with which victory was achieved was weighing in on the minds of the top leadership of the Freedom Party. A late-night meeting was called to chart the way forward. Attending the meet on the invite of Dipika’s political secretary, Javed Patel, were Mailapore Damodaran, Gulab Sharma and a special invitee, Dalpat Dalvi. One of the regional satraps of the Freedom Party, Robert Reddy was also present.

After a round of drinks over their victory, the group started discussions. Javed Patel read out the first item on the agenda – Performance of the Freedom Party in the polls. Robert Reddy proudly trotted out the performance of the party in his state. All the seats were won by their coalition; he waxed eloquent that he had managed to “sway a significant section of the socially oppressed” to embrace “the Religion of Love” and the dividend was there for all to see. But Damodaran, quick to undercut anyone who could be potentially outclimbing the political ladder, stepped in to observe that the same formula couldn’t be repeated across the country. To make his point, he trotted out the statistics – if the entire minority population voted for the party, they would still only get about 25% of the vote. To win, they needed at least 10% more.

Never to be left behind, Dalpat jumped into the conversation and pointed out that even the minorities that voted for the party could look elsewhere, unless they were made to feel special. Jabbing his finger in the air, he made a passionate point that minorities are feeling insecure and trotted out half a dozen press cuttings, for emphasis and effect.

Gulab was silent all through. Dipika could not read beyond Hindi and English and could make no sense of the news clippings, which were in various regional languages. She turned to Damodaran, who, as if waiting for this very moment, cleared his throat and started speaking – “There is a way…”

# 

## Deep in the Amazon jungles

It looked like any other office building, except that this one was right in the middle of the Amazon jungle. The rainforest cover was thick enough to make it difficult to predict the time of the day. Deepak Masani swatted away a mosquito that looked substantially bigger than the ones he tennis-batted around in India. He wondered, not for the first time, why he was here. The Finance Minister’s orders had been specific. Mailapore Damodaran had asked him to fly out to Rio De Janeiro, and from there connect with a private aircraft company that would take him deep into the Amazon. The business was to purchase used Large Examining Printing Equipment (LEPE) machines that could print 32 currency notes per sheet at the rate of 9,000 sheets per hour.

Used and discarded by the United States’ Bureau of Engraving and Printing (BEP), these machines were 144 feet (48 yards) long and could perform the whole process – full sheet examination, letter press printing functions, insertion of the security thread(s), product verification, and even cutting and packaging of the currency. A marvel of technology. A bloody currency giant.

A total of 15 cameras were installed throughout the machine for taking pictures, verifying watermarks under laser lights, and flagging flawed notes. A new machine would cost several millions of dollars; this used one could be bought for a fraction of that price. With creative invoicing and routing it through shell companies, the used equipment would become ‘new’ – both in looks and cost - when it arrived at the shores of India. The balance in the price would be distributed according to a long-held template – 52% to politicians, 23% to the bureaucrats and 25% to the political party in power. The party president, of course, double-dipped - once from the share that went to the politicians and a second time when the money was sent to the party. But what party, really? The president was the party, and all funds were controlled by her and her family.

Deepak’s passport was checked against a list before he was shown into a sparse 10 feet by 10 feet room that had only a large screen display and a laptop with a webcam attached, besides one desk and a chair. The camera was positioned at a comfortable height on the table. This would be his workplace from where he would be placing his bids.

Deepak was an officer of the well-regarded Indian Revenue Service (IRS). The IRS functions under the overall ministerial command of the Finance Ministry of the Government of India, though it directly reports to its administrative head, the Revenue Secretary. It is tasked with a flurry of duties, ranging from providing tax assistance to taxpayers, tackling fraudulent filing of tax returns, and aiding with policy guidance in tax-related matters. The IRS deals with both direct and indirect taxation. But none of these stated objectives explained Deepak’s trip to the Amazon jungles. It seemed like a strange assignment when he was first told about it. But nothing felt straight about this anymore. He was alone and clueless, if not a tad uneasy.

In his mid-forties with the first greys appearing, Deepak usually had a cheerful disposition. An easy guy mostly if a bit unambitious too. But he avoided compromises as a principle. So far, he had an exemplary, if uneventful, career. His colleagues knew him as an upright and honest officer, a rarity in a service that offers many a safe means to make more than an extra buck. But Deepak would rather take his family on a modest holiday to neighbouring Shimla or Manali (by train, of course) than indulge them to yearly trips abroad, like many of his colleagues did with theirs. He took great care to avoid situations that could taint his spotless reputation. It was with some foreboding, therefore, that he had agreed to make the trip to the remote Amazon jungles to bid for the printing machines. Not that he had much of a choice, what with the Finance Minister insisting that he take up the responsibility. Why was he singled out by the top boss for this job? The question kept playing on his mind.

Deepak had been to auctions previously, but this one was like nothing he had seen before. Every bidder was housed in a room and had to show the bid, not as a paddle but in the form of a five-digit code, consisting of numbers and characters – e. g. X7RF9. As he soaked in his surroundings, a mechanical voice announced the start of the process and explained the rules. A video of the item going up for auction would appear on the screen. After a while thereafter, bids would be accepted. Every participant would show their bid (the five-digit sequence) to the webcam for five seconds or so. After the laptop monitor said ‘accepted,’ the wait would begin. There was just that one chance. He placed his bid, and so did the other participants. After accepting all the bids, the laptop spewed out a message, ‘processing’, along with a clip of Tom & Jerry running around a coffee table. He subconsciously clenched and unclenched his fist as the cartoon played on loop.

The animation stopped and he saw a big red X on his screen. His bid had been rejected. He didn’t know what this could mean, but the big red X made his stomach clench.

The possibility of precisely such a setback had been anticipated back home by the wily Finance Minister and his trusted aide. Deepak had been briefed to bid another five-digit code in case the first bid failed. There were two more machines to be procured. Presumably, the new bid was of a higher value. Of the three LEPE machines being auctioned, India wanted at least two. With one machine gone, there was no room for error.

After a few other high-priced items, the second LEPE machine came up for auction. Deepak promptly typed in his new code and came out the winner. His bid for the third machine, though substantial in amount, failed. His competitor had outbid him a second time.

It was night in India and Deepak thought it prudent not to call and disturb the minister. Who knew what he could be up to at this time! Instead, he sent a cryptic message that just one of the three machines could be secured. As he walked out of the building, a pretty twenty-something handed him a sealed envelope, without a word and barely a nod. He had no idea what it contained but knew that he had to deliver it to the Finance Minister, although nothing about this was mentioned at the briefing. His part in the mission was done and it was time to head back home. As far as he was concerned, he did what he was asked to. There had been nothing fishy with his involvement. He still could not figure why the entire affair had to be conducted this way. Maybe someday he would, but all he wanted for now was to relax and go home.

# 

## An accidental meeting

Deepak was driven back to the makeshift airfield from where the private airplane took off and arrived in Rio four hours later. His flight to London was due in a few hours and he decided to relax a bit. Browsing through the menu at the business lounge, he settled for black coffee. A devout teetotaller, he did not so much as glance at the liquor section. As much as he tried to relax, everything about this clandestine business gnawed at him. What was so crucial about flying an IRS official to some god-awful spot in the Amazon to merely raise a code? What would happen next? And, was his job really done or would he still be involved in some way with this mysterious dealing?

His mind returned to the meeting he had with the Finance Minister, a few days before he boarded the flight to Rio. Everybody called the Finance Minister ‘Maida’ behind his back, including Deepak. Mailapore Damodaran was his real name, though. He was Chennai bred but adapted to the rigmarole of New Delhi politics with ease. He had degrees in law and management. Suave and articulate, he was seen as a slick intellectual in his signature starched white shirt and south Indian *veshti*. This was his dress code for India; when travelling abroad, he slipped as easily into a well-fitting suit with tie. Proficient in English and somewhat shaky with Hindi, he was well networked in New Delhi circles and a favourite among certain sections of the media.

Maida had other reputations too. His name was often dragged into controversies, especially to do with financial markets. Though nothing had been proven yet, the grim shadow of his misdeeds fell on his family too, who had supposedly benefited from the position he held. He belonged to the ruling Freedom Party that depended upon his counsel when in trouble.

Deepak had listened silently, nodding dutifully as Maida outlined the task at hand. The minister gave out curt sharp instructions on a strictly need to know basis. There wasn’t much by way of clarification that the IRS officer needed in the 25-minute briefing. Deepak always felt a general unease in his presence. Of course, he was aware of the controversies that surrounded the minister but was careful not to let that cloud his thinking. Besides, there was no point getting on the wrong side with someone as powerful as him.

“Hello Deepak.”

Deepak almost startled to see a man standing beside him. Standing a bit too close, indeed. He hadn’t noticed him come. A man with an imposing stature, light brown complexion, and something oddly disconcerting about him.

“I’m sorry, I… do we know each other?”

“I am Asad Mansoor, your Pakistani counterpart.”

Deepak had never met him before and felt inexplicably uneasy on hearing ‘Pakistani counterpart.’ The man smiled and began rattling off Deepak’s life story. “You were born in Bombay and your parents came over from Karachi in 1947, while still in their teens. They came with their parents who had to start from scratch after walking away from thriving textile businesses back in Karachi. Your parents met at a relative’s place and ended up marrying in the early sixties. You have a younger sister who is an advertising executive in Mumbai. Your twin sons are getting ready to apply for college.”

It took Deepak a while to settle his erratic breathing. Asad smiled and continued, “I was the one who bought the other two LEPE machines. What do you think is going to happen next?” Deepak had no clue. Asad’s smile grew wider as he continued.

“Your piece of the jigsaw puzzle is now over. You will hand this envelope over to your superior and that would be the end of it. A well-entrenched network will take the disassembled machines and paint them over, so a cursory inspection would make it look like a new machine. The machine itself will be invoiced through two or three countries, including Dubai and sometimes Singapore. At every stage, a markup will be added, and some money will get siphoned off into the accounts of the stakeholders. When the printing equipment eventually arrives in Mumbai, your customs officials will be told to give it a casual inspection since it is ‘top secret.’ Finally, it will make its way to your currency printing facility at Nashik.

“The entity that sold these machines operates in the grey market. In other words, it most likely got these machines intercepted when they were about to be cannibalized. Nobody knows where these are hidden till a buyer is found. Then, and lo and behold, it ends up in perfect working condition when re-assembled. But since you and I are signatories to the purchase, should something go wrong, it is us that our governments will blame. A used printing machine is not going to print great looking notes. Right?”

Deepak felt dry in the throat and a film of perspiration appeared on his forehead. What was going on? What was this man’s game? He could not be doing the Indian official, of all people, a favour by sharing all that he did. But something had rattled Deepak even more. If all of this was indeed the truth, he could be in deep trouble. Politicians had a way of covering their flanks, but he was a mere bureaucrat. A pawn, as it appeared to him now.

He needed to buy himself some insurance if indeed he were to fall into deep shit. Bureaucrats, across the world and especially in India, are adept in this task. He could not afford to wait for the hammer to fall. He would have to devise a strategy in advance to wriggle out of the mess that he would inevitably find himself in sooner or later.

He gathered his poise and asked, “But why are you telling me all this?” The Pakistani official offered a lopsided grin. “Let’s just say for the moment, that it is a courtesy from one officer to another.” It was obvious that the man would continue to be cryptic. Deepak finally smiled back. Both smiles were obviously fake. Although Deepak had pretty much steadied himself by now, the air still crackled with tension.

The Pakistani official excused himself and sauntered out of the business lounge, leaving Deepak clutching his coffee mug hard. And his growing unease.

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## The Money Laundering Game

Asad Mansoor’s words kept playing on Deepak’s mind till long after. He had done some reading before heading to Rio and went over his notes again. Like somehow, the answers to his troubled questions lay somewhere in the ocean of information he had sorted through. The LEPE acronym is a label of the Bureau of Engraving and Printing, US Department of the Treasury, and not an industry name. Printed sheets are sent directly to the LEPE, where the output is a packaged product ready for delivery to the Federal Reserve System. The LEPE essentially consolidates four currency production processes.

There are three lines of equipment – two in Fort Worth and one in Washington DC. The equipment is roughly half the length of a football field (about 35 meters by 35 meters.) The currency sheets coming from the Super Orlof intaglio press are jogged and fed directly into the feeder unit on the far right-hand side of the machine, making their journey to the pallets on the far left-hand side, where they come out as vault-ready cash packs. What makes this equipment remarkable is that it performs multiple inspections and verifications using high resolution cameras as it inspects, prints, verifies and packages currency, all at the rate of approximately 9,000 sheets per hour.

Much as he tried to take his mind off the whole thing, his thoughts went back to the ‘very honourable’ Finance Minister, Maida.

The minister was the firefighter for his Freedom Party led government but also turned out to be an embarrassment quite a few times. Deepak had heard of the minister’s uncanny ability to find ways to do graft in just about every deal. There was the case, for instance, of the government’s purchase of security printing paper from a British supplier. It was alleged that Maida, in cahoots with a few senior officials of the Finance Ministry, had ordered the supply of the product from a firm that had been blacklisted.

It had all begun with the creation of a new government firm to handle currency printing. Maida’s two favourite bureaucrats in the ministry were made founding chairman and managing director of the firm. Unsurprisingly, the Appointments Committee of the cabinet did not handle their appointments, nor were they endorsed by the panel. The unit under Reserve Bank of India, tasked with currency printing, was directed by the new firm to identify a supplier of security printing paper on the pretext that the inventory of the special paper in India was running low.

The firm that was eventually picked for the job, later stunned the establishment by claiming that some of its employees had falsified the quality of the printing paper. This was in breach of the security contract the company had entered into with the Indian government, and the firm was blacklisted. The government decided to float an e-tender to find a new supplier of security printing paper. However, the new entity hived from the Finance Ministry and headed by Maida’s trusted bureaucrats continued to source the material from the blacklisted firm.

Not just that, since the blacklisted company held a patent for the currency thread, this too was bought despite the blacklisting. The chairman-bureaucrat wanted to continue import of SPP from the discredited company despite the e-tender having been floated. He decided to write to the Home Ministry on his own, seeking permission from the minister to permit the import of SPP from the firm for three years. The Finance Minister later claimed that he was not privy to this. It was, of course, hard to believe for those who knew well that Maida Damodaran micro-managed matters in his ministry. Nonetheless, he wriggled out of the affair on this flimsy technical point, though few doubted that officials so close to him would have proceeded without his consent.

Given his stature in the government and the party, nothing much came out of the episode, but it left a bitter taste. It also sent out the clear message till the last man down the hierarchy that Maida had near indestructible immunity. He had, over the years, survived in the bad world of politics by using all his skills, both cleverly and dubiously. Years ago, he had rebelled against the Freedom Party and joined a breakaway regional group in the southern state of Tamil Nadu. Later, he had returned to the party fold, and none the worse for it. He was not only welcomed back but also rewarded with plum posts.

Deepak, like many other officials, knew of his boss’ abilities and understood the wisdom of not rubbing him the wrong way. Thankfully, he did not have to interact with the minister on a regular basis; the Amazon assignment was a rare occasion for which he took direct orders from him.

The security check for his flight had been announced and Deepak headed towards the gate. The question bothering him now was if he should talk about the Pakistani official to someone. If the man were to be believed, there was financial misappropriation to the tune of a few hundred crore rupees around the corner, with the Finance Minister and his cronies emerging clear beneficiaries. Perhaps the same would be the case for Pakistan. I am too small a man to worry about this, he finally decided, shuffling ahead in the queue. He would be in London soon and then on his way to Delhi after a day.

As he began to dial his wife’s number, it occurred to him that it was entirely possible for the Pakistanis to use the newly acquired second-hand machines to print counterfeit Indian notes and utilise the money to fund their nefarious activities. They were doing it already and the LEPE would be an excellent piece of equipment to scale it up in a big way. Besides, the technology would make the counterfeit currency notes even more difficult to tell apart from the genuine ones. He hung up before she answered.

On and off, Indian authorities were busting counterfeit currency rackets in various parts of the country, and most had links with Pakistan. From there, the tentacles spread to Indian states such as Kerala, where the outlawed Students Islamic Movement of India (SIMI) had its origin. There was an ugly nexus between Pakistani agents often backed by the establishment there and Islamist groups in India. Various Indian agencies including Department of Revenue Intelligence, Customs and Central Excise and the Enforcement Directorate, had their hands full tackling the menace.

Deepak was aware that the crisis went beyond counterfeit currency. A great deal of money found its way into India through illegal channels like hawala transactions, and they were used to fund Bollywood films and left-wing extremism. Though there were rules governing the foreign exchange remittances, certain groups of people and political parties were having a field day bringing into the country whatever amount they wanted.

He had heard that people with the right connections (read, with the Freedom Party and its Finance Minister) could bring in any number of containers packed with currency notes to parts of Kerala. He had also heard that everything went on under the supervision of Harish Gopal, the son of a senior Freedom Party politician, Santhana ‘Saga’ Gopal.

Deepak gulped down almost a full bottle of water. Only half listening to his wife on the phone, he wondered if he had indeed contributed to some big money game in the making. He suddenly missed his modest and comfortable apartment in Delhi quite sorely.

# 

## The Spreading Tentacles

It was a large room with several desks and today it was packed. They looked like rows of busy neat ants. A hundred chartered accountants were crunching some seriously big numbers. Very busy indeed, doing something that was not their everyday job and certainly not a straight honest task.

Chartered Accountant No. 21 (they were identified by numbers rather than names) made calculations pretty much the whole day. He wondered what the other CAs in the room were assigned with. It did seem like shady stuff but he brushed aside the idea soon enough and focused on the job at hand. He was also tasked with finding a beneficiary to give Rs.5 crores to, from the money on paper he was working with. He reported to a superior and did not ask questions. On a whim though, he wondered if the others too were working on dishing out Rs.5 crores each. That would certainly mean a big amount of money being moved around. But part of the job was to not ask questions and the promised commission beat anything he would earn through his day job.

Kerala was submerged under the June monsoon and Imtiaz Ali’s ramshackle hut was under serious threat of being swept away. He was a cycle puncture repairer living with his wife and seven children —three girls and four boys. At the best of times, he managed to make ends meet on a day-to-day basis. In case of a strike or *morcha* – which were too many too frequent, from issues about better wages or a *dharna* against a developmental project or the motley protests on killings - his business suffered. On such days, the family barely managed a meal. Such disruptions were common in Kerala, his home and place of work for years now.

The rain would just not stop. Imtiaz was vulcanizing a puncture on a bicycle tyre, squatting in his usual *lungi* and vest that had seen better days, and wondering where his next meal would come from. A well-dressed man approached him.

“Imtiaz Ali?”

He looked up and nodded.

“I am here to give you Rs.5 crores. In exchange for a few things you could do.”

Imtiaz rose up slowly, trying to make sense of what the man had said. When the disorientation settled, his first thought was that he was certainly being conned by this suited gentleman. People don’t just walk up to a poor man and promise him five crores just like that! Did he really say five crores?

He gave a short laugh.

“I am serious.”

“What do I have to do?” Imtiaz finally asked, holding his breath.

The man was pleased. He had not bothered to introduce himself or share his identity in any way. He patted Imtiaz on the shoulder and said, “Come with me and you will not be disappointed.”

Things started moving swiftly after that. Imtiaz drove with the man to a local co-operative bank where he was made to open a savings account and a fixed deposit account. Before he knew it, Imtiaz found in his hands thick wads of crisp notes, amounting to Rs.5 crores. His hands trembled under their weight. He hadn’t seen even a tenth of this money before. The mystery man asked him to deposit the money in the newly opened account. He quickly did what he was asked to. Now he was the holder of Rs.5 crores and a cheque book issued by the bank. What would be next, he wondered. Despite his giddy glee and lack of education, he knew that all this money was not his for spending. There had to be a catch.

And there was. He was asked to issue four cheques to a trust he had never heard of, each amounting to Rs.50 lakhs and spaced over six months. That left him with Rs.3 crores. He was then introduced to a man who wished to dispose off his old and dilapidated house for Rs.40 lakhs. Imtiaz, prodded by his benefactor, bought the house immediately. Miraculously, a contractor surfaced too, who offered to bring down the old house and raise a new four-BHK (Bedroom, Hall and Kitchen) house for Rs.60 lakhs. The mystery man goaded Imtiaz to take up the offer. At the end of these fast-paced transactions, he still had Rs.2 crores in cash and was the proud owner of a house that he would soon acquire.

It was all too fairytale-ish to go on in a single day. A lot had already happened and in his deliriousness, Imtiaz did not see the obvious. All he wanted was to rush home and share this new fortune with his family.

Within a few months, everything changed. He no longer had to continue with his cycle puncture repair work. He bought himself a multi-utility vehicle, a few new appliances for the house and promptly transferred his children from run down government schools to posher private institutions. Strangely enough, all parties involved (the vehicle agency, appliance seller and earlier the construction contractor) had one thing in common. They were all Muslim.

He was now down to his last Rs.75 lakhs, which he deposited into a fixed deposit scheme that would fetch him tax exemption and 8% annual interest. After a year, this would give him Rs.6 lakhs per annum as interest. He figured, with the help of his benefactor – Chartered Accountant No. 21 - that he could get by with Rs.50,000 a month for the rest of his life. Was there anything else he was expected to do in return? He was told that someone would contact him when the time came.

A few weeks went by. Imtiaz and his family still could not believe their sudden good luck but indulged themselves, nevertheless. The children had their own room, the wife had a well-equipped kitchen, there was a master bedroom and then two more rooms. When he would occasionally take a stroll in the local bazaar, friends and acquaintances wondered what this sudden change of fortune was all about. After all, Imtiaz now dressed in smart shirts and trousers. Even the umbrella he carried was an expensive one. He no longer haggled over his fish and vegetables, pulling out notes from his wallet (new and pure leather) with all the nonchalance of someone used to big money.

After his Friday *namaaz* at the local mosque, Imtiaz saw a stranger catch his eye. The man was tall and dusky. In accented Malayalam, he introduced himself as Shamsuddin. Something about him was odd but Imtiaz couldn’t quite tell what. He seemed like the kind who was used to having his way. Only weeks ago, one stranger had dramatically changed Imtiaz’s life; perhaps this one would take the happy story forward.

His defences began to relax.

Shamsuddin drew him aside and said, “You need to host three men in your house for a week.” Before Imtiaz could say anything, Shamsuddin added, “Don’t worry. You just need to feed them and give them a room in your house. They will stay there and do what they need to.”

“But-”

“They will not bother your family in any way. Now, I hope you will be a good host to my friends.”

It was said like a request but came across as an order. It was not something that Imtiaz had a choice about. The stranger placed a hand on Imtiaz’s shoulder and said he would get in touch soon with the arrival details of his ‘friends.’ He left immediately, before it even occurred to Imtiaz to say anything more.

The thought of housing three strangers for a week troubled him as he trudged back home. The more he thought about it, the more he became anxious. It was true his benefactor had said that when the time came, he would have to do something in return. But this? To host three strangers at home for a full week was not a welcome prospect.

He knew that his wife, Rehana, would never accept having strange men live in their house. After all, they had grown-up daughters. She was surprised that her husband had even brought up the matter at home. She promptly refused but Imtiaz knew he was helpless. He had to obey the directive.

“What if you said no?” she said.

He had no answer except a strong foreboding. If he did not cooperate, something really bad could happen. He felt it in his guts. At the very least, he would be pushed back to his poverty-stricken life.

Some 40 kilometres away, in another picturesque hamlet in Kerala, Abdul Jabbar cursed his fate one more time. By twenty, he had started to undertake minor electric repair work in neighbouring homes. At thirty, he stopped dreaming about a good life altogether. Of late, business had turned dull. Odd jobs fetched him meagre daily income. On a lucky day, he would manage to get Rs.500. Most of what he earned was drained into looking after his elderly parents and their never-ending medical expenses. Jabbar was forever borrowing from friends. His two sisters were married and had their own expenses to meet, though they chipped in when they could.

It was one of those all-too-frequent lean days and Jabbar spotted a well-dressed gentleman (rather out of place) - among low-income carpenters and labourers – at the tea stall he stopped by every day. He tapped Jabbar on the shoulder and politely asked if he could have a word with him. Jabbar had not seen the man before. Perhaps he lived in one of the palatial row houses that had sprung up in the last few years in the outskirts of town, owned by people who got their money from high-end jobs at the Gulf.

“*Assalam valequm* Abdul Jabbar. Do some work for me?” He said.

“What work?”

“The kind that can get you Rs.5 crores in return. I’m a chartered accountant and I know how to make you rich. Now.”

The offer left Jabbar too stunned to speak. He first thought that the stranger was offering him some kind of electrical repair work. It was too sudden and too good to be true. But if it were indeed true, Jabbar’s financial worries would be gone for good. He couldn’t help but start relaxing and rejoicing already. His daily struggles would be over, and his parents would never be deprived of decent medical treatment.

Jabbar was taken to a nearby private bank, where the chartered accountant gave him a big bundle of notes. He too went through the same drill of meeting the branch manager and opening a savings account. A sum of Rs.5 crores was deposited in the account, much to Jabbar’s amazement. “Is this all mine from today?” he asked.

“Of course. But you need to invest the money with care. You want this to multiply and not be carelessly spent, right?”

Thereafter, Jabbar agreed to everything. His benefactor suggested that Jabbar float a new business in his own name. A cheque of Rs.3 crores would be made in the chartered accountant’s name, accompanied by a letter stating that he had been authorised to invest part or the entire amount on Jabbar’s behalf in a clutch of solar farms — a few were named for his benefit. Jabbar was told that he would thereafter be left with Rs.2 crores, half of which he could use for himself in whatever way he desired — the chartered accountant advised him that a substantial part of that should be put in a fixed deposit account - and the rest could be utilised to buy property. The chartered accountant would get him a seller and a good deal. There would be no need, thereafter, to be dependent on menial work.

“Deposit the remaining Rs.1 crore in the savings account. You’ll know soon what else to do.” The chartered accountant left soon after without giving Jabbar any contact details.

It had all happened before Jabbar could register anything. It rattled him. But one thing he was sure of: He was getting Rs.1 crore in full to spend as he liked. In lieu, he was willing to follow the chartered accountant’s directives on the rest of the matter, though he still could not understand why this man was doing all that he was. He did buy a decent apartment for himself with the chartered accountant’s help. Then again, Jabbar too didn’t see that the bank manager, the man he had purchased the property from, and the owners of the solar energy firms were all Muslim.

Elsewhere across Kerala, more such ‘lucky beneficiaries’ were identified. They all had Rs.5 crores deposited in their newly opened accounts. Each was given precise instructions on ways to spend that money but leaving enough in hand to keep them happy and unquestioning. The total number of beneficiaries that received Rs.5 crores each was finally 2000. Chartered Accountant No. 21 and his likes were only very minor cogs in the huge and complex money laundering industry that stretched well beyond Kerala and the real beneficiaries were men and women far removed from the game itself, sitting on high positions in public life, hiding behind their clean and media-polished masks…

On the upper end of the societal spectrum, a similar game was being played. Jai Mangalam Jewels had an imposing showroom in Kochi. Regular clients here included the highly monied from the timber and sandalwood trade in the Gulf and personalities from the southern Indian film industry. Jai Mangalam Jewels boasted of the best and most expensive jewellery, the priciest diamonds and superior quality gold.

There was an exclusive inner circle of clients that Jai Mangalam catered to. It would sell them fake pieces for the price of real jewellery and transfer the balance amount to one of the offshore accounts the clients had, receiving an attractive ‘commission’ in the process. Everyone was happy; the clients accumulated unaccounted wealth and the jewellery store made a neat profit on its ledgers. An added bonus was that a celebrity or two would always be game to endorse the Jai Mangalam brand.

The store was owned by Mohammad Iqbal, who had turned his modest family-owned business into an internationally recognised brand. But big business requires big money, especially when laundering is involved, and Iqbal had hit upon a devious plan to achieve liquidity. Through his contacts in the bank branch where his business had accounts, he would procure fake letters of undertaking (LoU) on behalf of firms he had floated under various names and use them to get credit from overseas branches of the same bank. The elaborate banking system which kept track of fraudulent deals such as these was short-circuited with the help of his ‘men’ in the bank. The money thus procured would be used to import high quality pearls. Thanks to his contacts at the bank, he could get the LoUs without being asked for cash margins — in most cases it was supposed to be 100%. However, not every transaction involved the purchase of pearls. Most often, nothing was actually purchased. The money raised through the fake LoUs was used by the firm for various other purposes.

Jai Mangalam Jewels was not the only one, but it was certainly among the highest profile. Mohammad Iqbal and the slew of chartered accountants were not that different with what they did. Only the scale of the game differed. They and many like them were, after all, being nourished by a lackadaisical central government and a Finance Minister who had mastered the art of frauds.

# 

## Triumph Here, Helplessness There

Deepak was glad to be back home. The trip to the Amazon forests had left him drained and each time he thought of the Pakistani official at the Rio airport, he felt more than a tad uneasy. During his stopover at London, he caught up with an old friend. He felt nostalgic about the old times when they would spend endless hours on preparing for the Indian Revenue Service exams. Deepak had fared much better and was driven solely by an unwavering passion to serve the nation. His friend eventually took up a private job abroad, earning a good deal more than Deepak did. It was not for the first time that Deepak wondered if he made the wrong career choice. Every time he reflected on this, he would slip into a depressed mood. What would life have been with a cushy private job in some European city, a villa, and a sports car?

But he did not have the luxury to linger on these thoughts now. There was much to finish before his dreaded meeting with the Finance Minister. This meeting had to happen since his expedition and all that had followed during the bid process was off the record and could not be put in a file to be officially presented to the minister. He made his way to the minister’s chamber in North Block, carrying the sealed envelope which he was given after the bidding was done.

He made it to the minister’s outer office well within the scheduled time but had to wait for more than 15 minutes, as Maida was busy with a delegation of industrialists. They had come to petition him for sops to kickstart the country’s economic growth, he was told by the secretary, who sometimes shared titbits of such information. Deepak was momentarily distracted from his thoughts as he saw the delegation troop out — each immaculately dressed in three-piece suits with the exception of one, who sported an old-fashioned safari suit. He was ushered in soon after. The office boy was clearing the table of the tea things. Once he was gone and the door shut, the minister said, “Well, Deepak, you managed just one machine?”

“Sir.”

“My orders were clear, that we must get two.”

“We were outbid for two of the machines.”

Maida lost his cool, which he did quite frequently in private, though his public image was that of a calm and unflappable leader.

“You failed the assignment,” he hissed loudly, “and that has spoilt all our plans.”

Deepak was tempted to ask what exactly had got spoilt but shut up, instead.

“Sir, I did as I had been told. You had asked me to bid with one code first and then with a higher one the next time. I did exactly that.” He felt his usual unease in Maida’s presence but managed to continue. “I could have used the code for the higher bid amount on both occasions if I had been directed to do so.”

The minister realised they would get nowhere with such discussions. Besides, he did not want to get so tough with the IRS officer that he would start to feel aggrieved and open his mouth in public, god forbid, the media. He changed tack and softened his tone. “Anyway, what has happened has happened. Let me have the envelope. I’ll call you if needed.”

It signalled the end of the conversation and Deepak walked out of the chamber. Once the door shut, Maida carefully opened the cover, looked at the contents inside, placed it in a safe and turned the lock. He buzzed his assistant to cancel all appointments for the day. Nobody was to disturb him for at least the next couple of hours. Now, he could strategize his next course of action.

The first task was to deliver the money for the second-hand LEPE. He dialled a number from an unlisted mobile phone. The recipient of the call was known by his initials, KK, and was a well-regarded figure in the world of hawala transactions in India and abroad. Maida told him of the amount to be transferred and the address that it had to go to. Very soon, the hawala agent would get the money and a handsome commission as well. The hawala business worked entirely on trust and discreetness.

The next thing would be to arrange for the machine to be delivered for a revamp, from where it would come back looking new. He used the same phone and called up Cutting Edge Metallics, which was ostensibly engaged in designing high tech tools used by the aviation industry. The firm was housed in a nondescript structure in downtown Bengaluru and much of its profits came off the books — redoing old machines that could then pass off as new, going unnoticed from under the scrutiny of experienced eyes. Maida spoke to its chief executive, who had many years earlier been jailed on charges of embezzlement of the company’s funds. The money involved was easily to the tune of several crores of rupees. However, he came out unscathed in a legal battle that Maida - then not a minister but a highly successful corporate lawyer - had bailed him out of. Since then, the Cutting Edge chief and Maida turned thick friends with the friendship continuing well into Maida’s ministership.

There was also a third task waiting to be done. Once the machines turned ‘new’, they had to be delivered to the Indian government. But the government does not simply make a purchase worth crores of rupees just like that. There had to be a transparent bidding process and only creditworthy bidders with enough technical and financial credentials could partake in the process. But since there was no e-bidding, the process could be rigged to some extent.

Jeevan Technologies was among the dozen companies empanelled with the government of India for the supply of LEPE machines. Maida called up its managing director, with whom he had had a long and mutually beneficial relationship and asked him to be prepared to receive a machine soon. He would be told in advance of the amount he had to bid to ensure that he got the contract. How Jeevan Technologies would account for the ‘new machine’ in its books, was for them to figure out. After all, it would receive a second-hand machine on which it could make money using its technical expertise.

The Finance Minister did some quick back of the envelope calculations and concluded that everyone involved, including himself, could make a good load of profit if things went right as planned. He had also ensured that if something were to go awry, the deal could not be traced back to him. Besides, he was well padded in every way. The two senior bureaucrats, whom he had recently promoted as chairman and managing director of the entity hived off the Finance Ministry, were pretty much in his pocket. He had briefed them on the LEPE affair and from this point onwards, they would interact with the various other players involved, till the time came to close the financial deals and the ‘new’ currency printing machines were delivered to the government of India.

By all accounts, it was a daring and audacious operation that Maida had taken on. His motivation for such risky ventures came from his seemingly limitless lust for money, but also from the confidence that he was untouchable, thanks to the Freedom Party that he belonged to, and which ruled the country.

Heading the Freedom Party was the charismatic Dipika Bancroft; Dipika Sharma, before she was married to an American, Richard Bancroft. Dipika’s grandfather was independent India’s first Prime Minister. She had secretly felt like the royalty, growing up, Maida had heard from a very close aide of hers. It was a case of a small measure of charisma, and mostly a big measure of luck that turned the tide in senior Mr. Sharma’s favour. Plus, he was adept at staying on top, while warding off contenders, a quality that his son neither inherited nor understood. The art of keeping political enemies at bay seemed to skip a generation and showed up in his granddaughter, who made her foray into politics equipped with the right genes for the job and her own shrewd observations of him. She learnt the game fast and had a huge head start in any case.

Politics ran in her blood, which became apparent to Richard, within a decade of marriage. He eventually walked out of the marriage and returned to the US, rather heartbroken. She was happy to retain the surname and let go of the husband. More recently, she received news that he had passed away in Los Angeles. A carefully orchestrated accident, Maida was sure. Their two children, who lived with her, were called ‘Sharma’ after their names rather than Bancroft.

Dipika held Maida Damodaran in high esteem, despite the fact that he had once quit the party and joined hands with her rivals. Somehow, all was forgotten once he returned. The process of forgiveness had sped up, thanks to the many financial jigs he pulled off for the party’s first family.

If the party was taken care of, the government too was not a problem. Prime Minister Jagat Dhillon was a mild man who barely ever spoke up, let alone took strong action on anything fishy. He was seen as a personally clean and upright man but did not have it in him to take on senior ministers like Maida. His reluctance stemmed from the manner in which he had been made the Prime Minister. In the last general elections, the Freedom Party had emerged the single largest entity, and with the support of allies, was ready to form the government at the centre. Dipika had led the party to victory and there was much clamour for her to become the Prime Minister. But she refused the offer, claiming that her inner voice advised against it.

A good amount of drama ensued, with one sword-wielding youngster of the Freedom Party cadre climbing up a tree and threatening to slash himself half if she did not change her decision. But when it was clear that the party chief was not going to relent, senior leaders passed a resolution requesting her to anoint someone of her choice to the post.

The senior most leader was Biplab Banerjee, who had served as a minister for decades in various Freedom Party regimes. He was experienced, articulate, well-informed, and widely respected not just within his own party but the opposition too. Earlier, he had come within striking distance of becoming the Prime Minister. The only issue was that he spoke his mind too openly and was difficult to manage. Thanks to his booming voice, he was also called Boom-Boom Banerjee, behind his back.

Dipika needed someone she could dictate to constantly and Banerjee was not puppet enough. She finally chose an academic-turned politician, Jagat Dhillon, who could be trusted to toe her line. Jagat was as surprised as the others, with his name being finalised for the post of the Prime Minister.

Over the next few months, he fully justified the faith his party leader had placed in him, even routing important government files to her for an opinion. He was dubbed an ‘accidental prime minister’ by sections of the media, and he repeatedly proved them right. Ministers close to Dipika soon found to their relish that they could arm-twist him, and they openly proclaimed that their loyalty lay more with the party chief than the country’s Prime Minister. Maida was one of those ministers. The Prime Minister was aware of the many controversies that his Finance Minister was involved in, but he could do little about it. Maida had direct access to the party supremo.

Having covered his tracks – and rather well – Maida took a moment to relax in his office chair that was actually a recliner, fitted with high-end massage settings. Using yet another phone, he dialled a number. “So, Laila, are you free tonight? The usual place, of course.”

Earlier, he had had a long chat with his son on the LEPE affair, but cut short his wife, who lived in their hometown, with a curt, ‘I’ll call you later on.’

While Maida was ‘busy’ at his office, Prime Minister Dhillon was still at his official residence, having settled down for an early lunch. He was seventy-five and looked a haggard ninety. He had no strength to push himself too hard. After lunch, he would be chauffeured to his office in South Block, where he would work for four hours, post which, he would either return home or attend scheduled functions. Jagat was morosely considering a plateful of salad, which his daughter, Harminder Kaur, was persuading him to have. She was a professor of Ethical Studies at one of New Delhi’s leading universities and understood well the pressures her father was functioning under. Jagat had been briefed by his staff in the Prime Minister’s Office (PMO) about the growing menace of counterfeit currency, allegations of fraud against some of his ministers and all sorts of financial wrongdoing. And this was apart from negative media reports on the policy paralysis his government had sunk into. His image was taking a beating and he could do little about it. He knew for certain that there were leaders within the party and the government who were taking delight in his diminishing stature.

His thoughts went back to the days when he was a star of the academic world. He taught Economics at prestigious global universities and was held in high esteem by the best minds in the field. His intellect was such that he did not have to bend or bow before anyone. He was highly respected for both his grasp on the subject and his personal integrity. Even when he was appointed Governor of the Reserve Bank of India, he held cordial relations with his colleagues and superiors in the government, without any compromises. As the country’s Finance Minister, a decade earlier — and solidly backed by the then Prime Minister — he had demonstrated his worth, pulling the country from the brink of economic collapse. The deterioration in his stature began after he assumed prime ministership, picked personally by Dipika.

Harminder Kaur gently steered him back. “Dad, why can’t you take action against these people in the government?”

“What can I do?” the Prime Minister said with a deep frown and wrung his fingers in desperation.

“Your name is being sullied. You need to tell Madam that action has to be taken. The image of the government is at stake.”

“I can do that, but as always, she will ask me to exercise restraint. It’s not that I have not tried before, but Madam is not in favour of moving against these ministers.”

“Why? How come they have such hold over her?”

He did not reply. Pushing the plate aside, Jagat sighed and got up from the magnificent dining table. On his way to office, he decided to take a detour and follow his daughter’s advice. Once more, he was enroute to meet and take up the matter with the party president. Prime Minister Dhillon felt deeply tired at the prospect of meeting Dipika.

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## Government of Scams

With every new scam coming to the fore, the Prime Minister wondered if he was heading the government of India or a body of scams. And nearly everyone involved had direct or indirect connections with the Finance Minister. He had raised the matter with Maida a few times with as much authority as he could muster, which was not much. Expectedly, he received evasive replies and assurances that nothing was amiss. Jagat was also told that the rumours of wrongdoing were actually spread by the government’s detractors. The Finance Minister was a smooth-talker, and nothing seemed to disrupt his composure. On one occasion when the Prime Minister pressed harder, Maida had said, “Let the dogs bark and let sleeping dogs lie.” The Prime Minister had just been instructed by his minister to lay off.

The corridors of power and the media were abuzz with the exposure of a scam of monumental proportions, concerning the sale of spectrum for telecommunication and coal blocks. By some accounts, they amounted to more than Rs.3 lakh crores. The Telecommunications Minister belonged to one of the alliance parties, while the Coal Minister was from the Freedom Party. Both decisions involved financial implications and Maida was in the thick of it. These scandals could have a disastrous impact on the government, but for now, some people were having fun. Such was the environment of audacity that when members of the opposition raised the issue involving the misappropriation of a smaller amount of public funds in a different case, a ruling party member of parliament dismissed the allegation on the ground that the amount concerned was too small for the party to get their hands dirty with!

The spectrum rip-off would not have made it to the public domain, but for the tenacity of an opposition party leader, Govindan Ramaswamy, the Comptroller & Auditor General of India (CAG), and a section of the media which latched on to the issue rather relentlessly.

Govindan was a maverick, a one-man army within his party. He had studied Economics at some of the best institutions in India and abroad and was a self-trained lawyer as well. Though he had no licence to practice law, he did intervene as a citizen of the country in cases that fancied his attention. Once he got interested, he would pursue the issue with a doggedness that surprised his fellow party men and made his targets squirm.

Govindan could not be bothered with political correctness when it came to the pursuit of justice. He had smelled a rat in the spectrum allocation issue and had launched himself with full force, collecting material and building a case for the courts. There were times when he had to cross swords with his colleagues over his aggressive conduct, but the fact is that his party benefited from the activism and even his detractors secretly admired his tenacity. Govindan was convinced that the Finance Minister was steeped in corruption all the way and needed to face the law. And soon.

Towards the end of its first term, the Freedom Party led coalition government initiated the sale of spectrum for telecom use. The Telecommunications Ministry fixed a cut-off date and time for the submission of bids from private players. Barely hours before the deadline, the ministry advanced the time of submission, thus leaving many bidders stranded. But there were a select few who had been told ahead of the change and promptly given their bids within the revised time limit. The abrupt change in schedule and other procedures that were subsequently followed, raised a storm. Prime Minister Dhillon wrote to his minister asking him to ensure that the licence allocation was done in a fair and transparent manner.

This was the only step that the Prime Minister took by way of intervention. The Telecommunications Minister wrote back assuring that all processes had been followed. He knew the Prime Minister would not — could not — pursue the matter further and he was right. The Finance Ministry came under the scanner too since the decision had financial implications. The Finance Minister did not red flag the matter. Everything was being done in the ‘interests of boosting the country’s telecom industry and benefiting the end customer.’

The licences were eventually awarded to bidders on a first-come-first-serve basis, who had bid ridiculously low amounts to secure the spectrum. Some of them later sold the spectrum to a third party for much larger sums. The rip-off to the public exchequer was huge. So were the benefits accrued by the Telecom Minister and Finance Minister for their complicity.

Unfortunately for the Freedom party, the scandal could no longer be brushed aside. Some non-governmental organisations approached the Central Vigilance Commission (CVC), which in turn asked the country’s premier internal probe agency, the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI), to inquire into the matter.

On his part, Govindan kept up the pressure, appearing before the media and hammering home the point of the grand loot of public money. While the CVC did not do much, the CAG stated that the entire process of allocation of spectrum had lacked fairness and transparency. Eventually, the matter reached the Delhi High Court. The court rejected Govindan’s plea to direct the Prime Minister to sanction prosecution of the Telecommunications Minister. But that did nothing to smother the stench. A bunch of petitions had made their way to the Supreme Court, and the country’s highest court asked the government and the Telecommunications Minister to respond to the allegations.

Things had begun to move fast by now. Govindan had taken his petition to the apex court, seeking directions to the Prime Minister. The Enforcement Directorate, specialising in money-related crimes, had also got into action since there were issues of foreign exchange violations as well. The CAG submitted its report to the Dhillon government, claiming a loss of nearly Rs.2 lakh crores to the exchequer — a claim that was quickly rubbished by the government’s senior leaders. One of them, who also happened to be among the country’s most reputed lawyers, derided the CAG report and said that there had been ‘zero loss’ in the deal. The Supreme Court did not concur, asking the CBI to expand the framework of its investigations to cover the corporate houses that had gained from the rigged bidding process.

Months later, various players including the Telecommunications Minister and beneficiaries from the corporate sector were charged, arrested, jailed, and later released on bail. The Supreme Court ordered the cancellation of all licences.

There were more than a hundred. While the court maintained there was no prima facie material to prove that Maida had benefited from the spectrum sale, the relief was token. Along with the Telecommunications Minister, he had ended up with his image irreversibly sullied in the public eye. The Prime Minister had remained a mute spectator all along while the government’s reputation was torn to shreds. All that he could say by way of defence was: “I have not personally benefitted from the deal.” Many openly proclaimed that he may have had a clean image but since he had allowed the scam to flourish in his regime, his own reputation too was tainted.

Had the spectrum scam been a one-off case, the Dhillon government and the Finance Minister could have perhaps got away with some deft manipulation with the media and other opinion-makers in the private domain. But they were hit by another storm - irregularities in the allocation of coal blocks. A draft report of the CAG accused the government of wrongful allocation of coal blocks during the five-year period of the Dhillon regime, leading to a windfall gain of Rs.7 lakh crores to the allottees. The ruling dispensation’s initial reaction was predictable. The Prime Minister stated that he would quit public life if found guilty. The government rejected the claim, stating that the loss was merely presumptive and not real. That said, the charges were too serious to be ignored and the CBI was roped in. Meanwhile, a public interest litigation filed in the Supreme Court demanded the cancellation of all coal block allotments. The court took up the task of monitoring the CBI probe, thus tightening the noose around the government.

There was more trouble in store, though. A parliamentary panel report on coal and steel said that the coal blocks were distributed in an unauthorised manner. It recommended that allotments in places where the mining process had not begun, be scrapped. Meanwhile, there was a twist to the story. The Law Minister was caught reading the CBI’s investigation report before it was submitted to the apex court, and he had to submit his resignation as a consequence. It happened after the CBI admitted to this fact in an affidavit filed before the court. The minister’s explanation was that he had merely read through the report to review it for grammar. Critics were quick to ridicule this and wondered when he had turned an English professor!

As the case proceeded, the CBI filed cases against several allottees, some of which were eventually dropped by the probe agency. Later on, the Supreme Court was to cancel all the dubious allocations. But before that could happen, the government's image had suffered yet another body blow, and questions were raised on how the Finance Ministry under Maida had approved of the allotment when the irregularities were patently obvious. The Prime Minister’s already weak stature had been further sullied by his failure to act against his ministers.

Jagat had sought for and received an appointment with Dipika. It should ordinarily have been the other way around, but from the day he assumed charge, Jagat reconciled to this equation in which she was superior to the country’s Prime Minister. On the agenda was the discussion on the two scams and also the persistent attempts by certain ministers to bypass his authority. He had decided to give in his resignation if this is how things remained. His press advisor, a well-known media professional, couldn’t emphasise enough that he was losing credibility faster than the speed of scams that were piling up.

Dipika received him in her office within the residential complex. Two of her cohorts were hovering around with no signs of leaving. Jagat was uncomfortable in their presence but could do little. He then began to brief her on the scams, but she cut him short.

“I am aware of these issues. They have no substance.”

“But Madam, they are destroying our credibility. We must act.”

“What do you propose?”

“I cannot paper over these developments. I prefer to quit.”

“Don’t overreact, Dhillon ji. Such troubles don’t last long.”

The Prime Minister then poured out his other grievance. He seemed on the verge of tears. Madam seemed more amused than concerned. She said softly, “You should not be so sensitive. These things happen.”

“But they are happening because these ministers have your protection. They are undermining the office and authority of the country’s Prime Minister.”

“The *authority* of the Prime Minister?” Her tone grew steely. “And who made you the Prime Minister? Can you not handle these matters with a bit more tact?”

Jagat felt more fatigued than exasperated. He realised that the conversation was not going anywhere. His signature composed smile appeared involuntarily, masking his helplessness. After finishing the proffered cup of tea – that tasted as bitter as his prime ministership – he rose and left. The media had gathered outside, and mics appeared promptly in his face. After a few weak attempts at dodging them, he finally said, “My discussions with Madam were routine, all to do with affairs of the party and governance. I will resign if any charge is proved personally against me. The government is working fine. There are people who want to discredit us, but their efforts will not succeed.”

His media advisor, who heard the remarks on television, sighed. Once more, the Prime Minister had demonstrated a lack of gumption. If only he had quit, he would've bowed out with some dignity left intact. Elsewhere, Maida Damodaran chuckled. Madam had prevailed yet again, and he would remain safe.

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## The Three Strangers

Imtiaz Ali lived close to the beach on Kerala’s coastline. These days, he walked down to the shore early in the mornings to soak in the quiet of daybreak, punctuated only by the sounds of the lapping waves. He would unfailingly thank Allah for the turn in his fortunes. The better part of the day would be spent hanging around with friends, some of whom were new as a consequence of his recently acquired wealth. He made daily household purchases, most of which were unthinkable in the pre-sudden-money days, but had turned into essentials now.

It was mostly to escape the fear gnawing at the back of his mind to host the three strangers in his house that he came to the beach every day. Strangers who had to be fed and boarded and whose instructions he would have to follow. He comforted himself with the thought that it would be only for a week that they will stay in his house. He now looked forward to the event; the earlier it was done with, the better. Things would be back to normal after that. How inconvenient would it really get to host these men?

It turned out that his wish was granted in the next few days. He received a message that the three men would be arriving in exactly seven days. They were to be received by him at an isolated stretch of the beach at two in the night and taken home. And from then on, for the rest of the week, he would be told by the guests to run certain errands, which he would need to oblige.

“Remember, do not ask any questions. You will be asked to do whatever would be needed. Do what you are asked to go about your life normally. If you poke your nose into this, the consequences could be disastrous,” the caller said firmly. Imtiaz had no inclination to rock the boat. He wondered though whether the disaster meant all the money being taken away from him. But something told him that it could mean something far more sinister.

At the appointed hour a week later, Imtiaz was at the beach. Before leaving, he had ensured that one of the rooms was ready for the guests, and his family was safely cloistered in the rest of the house. Family members had been strictly forbidden from interacting with the new arrivals. It was a moonless night, and the shore was a patch of dark. But Imtiaz made it to the spot comfortably; he knew this stretch from the time he was a boy. As he stood there, his eye picked a motorboat closing in from a distance. It barely made a sound, and he soon realised why. The boat had sails fitted, which had been put into operation while the motor had been switched off. Once it docked at the shore, he saw three men get off and approach him. The boat was left at the shore.

No words were exchanged except the *As*-*salaam-valequm* greeting. The three guests were young — probably in their late twenties — and clean-shaven. They were well built, not muscular but fit, like seasoned soldiers. They carried a backpack each, which appeared to burst at the seams with whatever was stuffed inside. The four began to walk in silence, with Imtiaz leading the way. Within ten minutes, they were home. Imtiaz unlocked the main door and led them to their room, which had been equipped with three mattresses spread on the floor. One of them politely told Imtiaz that they needed nothing else for the moment and softly shut the door. It was just three hours before daybreak and as he retreated to his room, he found his wife and children wide awake. He told them that he brought the guests home. None of them could sleep, troubled by the uncertainty that lay ahead. His family was generally apprehensive, but he was wondering about something more immediately specific.

It was unimaginable that the three men had travelled the sea in that little motorboat. Maybe a bigger vessel, a ship even, had dropped them near the coast from where they used the boat to come ashore. Imtiaz would not be getting any answers from his guests since he would not be asking questions.

In the meantime, the three men were relaxed enough to sleep. They congratulated each other on having made it this far. A merchant ship had sailed from Karachi, Pakistan, laden with routine tradable goods, and they had sailed aboard as members of the crew. They had then accosted an Indian motorboat, seized it forcefully, taken captive the six Indian crew members on board, knifed them and threw their bodies overboard. They had kept a couple of the Indian crew alive for navigation to the coast, after which, they too were killed as mercilessly. “*Jung me sab jayaz hai* (It’s all fair in war),” one of them said. The ship, in the meanwhile, had proceeded on course its journey.

They also thanked their stars to not have accosted any Indian coast guard patrol vessel. India’s long coastline stretches along more than 7,000 kilometres and the agencies - the Coast Guard and the Indian Navy - have a difficult time securing it 24X7. Besides, a kind of complacency had set in; there had been no attacks in the recent past via the waters that surrounded India on three sides. The security apparatus in the Indian maritime domain was lax. Coastal surveillance equipment like radars and real time information gathering as well as management and dissemination of maritime data were nearly non-existent.

Elsewhere, some within the security agencies were crying hoarse on the need for greater coordination between the various maritime agencies, the strengthening of the Indian Navy with real time tracking of fishing boats along the coasts. The elite National Security Guards had to be better trained to tackle wartime invasions by terror groups and patrol boats needed to be equipped with state-of-art technologies to detect and confront intrusions. But for now, three mysterious men had alighted on the shores of a coastal village in Kerala, undetected.

It was seven in the morning. Imtiaz knocked the door and announced tea. One of the men popped his head out, took the tray, murmured his thanks, and shut the door. They were not to be seen until lunch. This time, the three trooped out and sat at the dinner table. Half hour later, they retreated once more to their room. The room had an attached bathroom and thus the family was spared the occasion of having to share its other washroom with the guests.

The next morning, one of the men asked Imtiaz to step inside the room and asked him if he had told anyone about their arrival. The man looked pleased when the answer was ‘no.’ “Keep it that way,” he said. It sounded like an order. Imtiaz was then given the first of his errands. He was handed over the address of a shop about 30 kilometres away and told to meet the owner, a Mr. Niaz. Imtiaz was to collect a sealed bag and return home. He was advised to be back only after sundown. Needless to add, he was not to open the bag or talk to Niaz, except to confirm his identity.

It was small and light, and it was sealed. As darkness set in, he was back home and straightaway handed over the bag to the man who had sent him to fetch it. Over the next three days, the same process was repeated with different addresses. The bags that he brought back differed in size and shape. But invariably, they were lightweight.

Imtiaz was curious about what might be in the bags he was bringing but resisted opening them and asking questions. Even when he would sit down for dinner with his family, everyone ate in tense silence. “They would soon be gone and then everything would be fine,” he often told his wife and children. But the assurance felt unconvincing even to himself. Finally, it appeared that the men had got all that they had wanted.

They were pleased with what they saw. Imtiaz had delivered parts of sophisticated arms to them. The firearms had been sent in a CKD (completely knocked down) condition and were re-assembled by the three men in the privacy of ‘their’ room. The weapons had arrived in the remote coastal belt of Kerala through a circuitous route across the country, dodging agencies along the way. Among the goods were suicide vests as well.

A suicide vest is an improvised device fitted with explosives and a detonator, worn by suicide bombers. Once detonated, the shrapnel that flies out of the vest consists of bearings, nails, screws, bolts etc., and they end up causing large-scale casualties in their vicinity. The earlier versions of suicide vests were used in inter-country wars. In the second Sino-Japanese conflict, for instance, a Chinese soldier detonated the vest he was wearing, killing nearly two dozen Japanese nationals at a warehouse. Chinese troops, fitted with these suicide vests, would throw themselves at approaching Japanese tanks, blowing up the tank and themselves in the process. But even before the Chinese had adopted these means, the Japanese had engaged in similar suicidal attacks. Loaded with anti-tank mines and other explosive devices, they would blow themselves up before enemy forces.

One of the ‘benefits’ of suicide vest attacks is that the culprit gets completely obliterated in the process, making it nearly impossible for probe agencies to decisively determine identity. Suicide bombing had, therefore, become the preferred method of destruction with several terrorist groups. The mercenaries thought nothing of losing their lives in the greater glory of their religion, plus the prospect of paradise lay temptingly ahead, where, they were told, they would be treated as glorious martyrs.

The three men at Imtiaz’s house felt the same. They now had all the ingredients they needed - guns, ammunition, explosives and suicide vests. All they had to do now was to wait. The signal for action would come soon. It was time for the evening *namaaz*, and they piously spread out their prayer mats.

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## The Intricate Network

One critical link in the intricate fake currency network flourishing in India was Santhana Gopal or Saga as he was often called. Of late, he had reason to be content. He was tasked with disseminating Rs.10,000 crores among a section of Indian Muslims. Saga had identified a bunch of individuals who could be targeted; mostly people in desperate need for monetary assistance and the kind who would not ask too many questions.

The town was exploding with real estate development and his hardware outlet, the National Hardware Agency, was doing well. New structures came up, driven by the rise in demand for residential complexes. It felt like a great deal of liquid money was floating around, which was fuelling the realty sector. People were buying flats by way of investment rather than to live in them.

But the store had become more of a side venture. His main business now was the distribution of counterfeit currency. He was introduced to it a few months ago by one of his builder clients. Initially, Saga was reluctant. He wasn’t willing to get into something as shady as this. Money was important but not enough to risk his life for. It needed some persuasion to convince him. The builder explained to him (rather methodically) about the near zero chance of his being caught if something were to go wrong.

The counterfeit currency business was too deeply layered and complex even for the builder to understand. Saga would just be one seemingly insignificant cog in a large wheel. This assurance plus the prospect of big easy money eventually pulled him in. Among the first sub-agents that Saga recruited was Ramesh Badri. Ramesh was to distribute fake currency to their targets – poor Indian Muslims. Saga went on to give a crash course to Ramesh about the business and sought to pass on the confidence he had got from the builder. Suitably charged and convinced, Ramesh went a step further and found creative methods for the money distribution. He managed to build a sizeable client base in just a few months.

Ramesh belonged to the Nair community of Kerala, known for its unwavering patriotism. Their fierce loyalty for their land has been legend. The British had, in the beginning of the 19th century, restricted the entry of Nairs into the British Indian Army. Following independence, the Nair Brigade of the Travancore State Force was merged with the Indian Army and became part of the 9th Battalion, Madras Regiment, making it the oldest battalion in the army.

The Nairs had become rulers of minor kingdoms by the time the Portuguese arrived in Kerala (known as the Malabar region then), towards the end of the 15th century. Over time, the ‘Nair’ name became synonymous with brave, armed warriors. But the rise was followed by a steady decline over time, under the eventual suppression of the British rule. The Nairs had the mortification of being disbanded and disarmed.

Ramesh was aware of his community’s glorious past, a history that had been passed on with pride from one generation to the next. A constant reminder of this conflicted with his now new line of work. But the rewards were too big to refuse. However, a lingering remorse surfaced sporadically.

Whether or not he understood the fake currency business as well as Saga had taught him, he was certain of at least one fact. He seemed to have involved himself in something very wrong. A classmate of Saga’s had approached Ramesh with an offer that was too good to refuse. He would be given a large sum of money and he had to invest a part of it in a greenfield project for clean energy. The investment would fetch him decent returns over the years. He could use the rest of the money as he pleased with no questions asked, whatsoever. He was thus sucked in.

While Ramesh leisurely sipped his Scotch and contemplated his life, Maida couldn’t stop gloating over the amount of money he was actually sitting on. He had many people like Ramesh working for him and the likes of him, with the real benefits going to a select minority community as well. National security was put on threat in the process but that seemed like an ignorable issue. The so-called greenfield project (one of several such) was fake too. It was a façade for laundering money. Ramesh promised himself that he would quit the mysterious business as soon as he had accumulated enough money for a more comfortable life. A promise he himself was not sure of keeping, especially after a couple more drinks.

In the meantime, the trust to which Imtiaz had given Rs.2 crores at the behest of the chartered accountant, was doing rather well. Its account, held at the same cooperative bank where it had all started for him, now had in excess of Rs.200 crores. In recent months, several individuals who had gained a small fortune in near similar fashion had been persuaded to deposit a part of their overnight earnings. But that was not all. The account was also flush with counterfeit currency that was difficult to distinguish from the real. Only a close-knit group within the bank, including the ever-obliging manager, was privy to this.

Although the cooperative banks came under the larger purview of the Reserve Bank of India, they had a huge leeway to function independently. Besides, many of them were managed from behind the curtains by influential political heavyweights who had decisive stakes in these banks. This made it ever so easy for interventions by outside agencies to be regularly sabotaged by political entities.

The media was filled with reports on Kerala emerging as a potential nerve-centre in south India for Fake Indian Currency Notes (FICN). It posed a stiff challenge to Kaliachak and Malda in West Bengal, which were the focal points for FICN in eastern India. Intelligence agencies had been grappling for long to nab the masterminds behind these ventures but despite busting a few rackets and arresting people, little had been achieved. The task was now tougher since fake currency producers were getting increasingly better with copying various security features of genuine currency. Earlier, fake notes were printed via low quality photocopying machines; now high-end offset printing machines, of the LEPE kind, were used.

While the old time transitional cross-border smuggling routes were still operative, new ones were constantly explored. These were relatively risk-free since intelligence agencies had not yet fully identified and surveyed them. Thus, if Punjab or Jammu & Kashmir, as well as Nepal remained the usual routes to bring in FICN, those in the south had gained popularity in recent times. Here, fake currency came in containers via the sea route and was managed on the shore by people already tipped off for the job. They had to get the consignments away with the authorities looking the other way.

South Indian coastline states such as Kerala had several isolated spots along the coast, where fake currency wrapped in towels, and such would be simply dumped on the shore and picked up by local handlers. This was similar to the modus operandi in the northern states bordering Pakistan and Bangladesh. Bundles of FICN wrapped in scraps of cloth and paper bags would be tossed across the porous borders into India, from where they were carted away to their destinations.

Of the many cross-border agencies involved in pumping fake currency into India, Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) is especially active. It has acquired expertise in seamlessly merging terrorism in India with the FICN racket.

Around the same time as Imtiaz was running errands for his three guests, two gangsters from Nepal were arrested by the Madhya Pradesh police. They had been nabbed along with fake Indian currency of Rs.500 denomination and had revealed that a high-ranking citizen of Nepal had been in touch with underworld don Dawood Ibrahim (who lived in Pakistan) as well as the ISI to conduct massive fake currency operations. Among other things, this money was used to fund terrorism and the drug trade.

The role of the ISI and terrorist groups in the entire network did not surprise Indian intelligence authorities, who were aware that billions of dollars’ worth counterfeit Indian currency printed in Pakistani presses was in circulation in India. Pakistan may have denied the allegation repeatedly, but it has not been able to explain why it buys currency paper and special inks far in excess of its own currency requirements.

Pakistan imports the special paper and ink from various countries including the UK, Sweden, and Switzerland. After their own currency is printed, the excess is utilised, under the ISI’s direct supervision, to produce fake Indian currency. The counterfeit money is then transported to its destinations abroad by various means – air, sea, and mules. Insiders in probe agencies knew that the penetration of this fake currency is so deep in India that it was found in the chests of a nationalised bank in Uttar Pradesh.

The modus operandi is simple. There are main agents who buy the fake notes of higher denominations at 50% of the face value from the ISI-Dawood Ibrahim network and then distribute them in small lots through their subsidiary agents. These agents then lure passengers travelling to India from Nepal, Bangladesh, or the Gulf countries to carry the currency. In India, these passengers are contacted by an India-based agent who collects the goods.

A year after the Freedom Party returned to power in its second term, intelligence estimates claimed that the ISI had set aside an annual budget of Rs.1800 crores to organise terror activities in India, through the use of counterfeit currency. Three years down the line, the Financial Intelligence Unit, falling under the Ministry of Finance, had reported a 400% increase in counterfeit currency transaction reports. In just one year, more than 12,500 such reports had been generated with a face value of Rs.1 million crores (10 lakh crores).

Saga and Ramesh felt important about their roles as foot soldiers in the game. But they were mere pawns in the counterfeit currency network. The real players were elsewhere, far removed from the ground.

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## The Real Estate Boom that Never Was

Danish Ahmed had a modest start in his realty businesses but emerged as an influential member of the society with his growing wealth and association with various religious radical elements. The ever-increasing need for money to sustain his stature came from unaccounted earnings. The black money component — undeclared money available for use in many ways, including laundering — had for decades formed a key element of the real estate sector. Sellers like Danish insisted on taking cash as part of their payment for properties since it did not reflect in the account books and therefore could evade paying tax. Earlier, people would hoard their black money, but with the boom in real estate, they had begun to invest that amount in instant income-producing assets such as properties ready for immediate possession. The working of this mechanism was simple. If a buyer wishes to acquire a flat worth Rs.2 crores, the seller would take just Rs.75 lakhs in white and the rest in cash (as black.) The buyer can then rent this property that could fetch him nearly 20%, that is Rs.15 lakhs per annum, by way of rental income.

It was now time for Danish to look beyond business. He had accumulated enough, and it continued to be a steady flow. He began to nurture the dream of entering politics. His connections with radical groups and his own money could be put to good use. A foothold in politics could be a good backup in case something was to go wrong later. He knew that the real estate boom, which he had milked to the full, was actually a bubble that could burst any day. After all, the boom had not been born of market forces but by hundreds of devious manipulators like himself.

Meanwhile, he revelled in his fortune. He had properties in Malappuram and Kozhikode in Kerala. He had received reports from his staff that 95% of his residential units in the two towns had been booked, which meant that his firm, National Real Estates, had netted close to Rs.10 crores as advance money. Over the next four years, more cash would flow in as the owners who had booked the flats would pay their instalments. For now, he had something else in mind. He would approach his bank, raise a loan of Rs.50 crores against his Rs.10 crores, ostensibly to develop another property. Work on the property for which the advance sum had been received, would be funded from the instalments.

It was not the most ethical way to conduct business. In the first place, the money through instalments would not be enough to get the construction underway at the fast pace that his firm had promised his clients, who had paid in advance. Besides, it was wrong to divert money from one project to another. But these considerations did not bother Danish. Many others were getting away with it, leaving customers who had paid lakhs of rupees for their dream homes in the lurch. Only a few unfortunate ones were caught. His Medina Infra Projects was not among them. Yet. But high-profile Vaishali Homes, with residential properties across the National Capital Region (NCR) that borders Delhi, had not been so lucky.

Vaishali Homes was owned by brothers Vaibhav, Arvind and Sohan Gupta, who had returned to India after a 20-year stint in Dubai with a reputed construction company. They had picked the essentials of the real estate business there and with their combined savings, launched their firm in the NCR. They began with a modest 100 flats, but rose rapidly in just a few years, with more than 50,000 flats under their brand. Then came the downfall, which was equally swift. It left nearly 35,000 home buyers stranded, as the company failed to deliver on its promise. Vaishali Homes had played truant and its owners found themselves behind bars.

The real estate sector was peaking when the trio had decided to launch their venture. The Gupta brothers took way more exposures than they could sustain. They used the inflow of cash from buyers and other sources to acquire more land and expand their business. Rather than completing existing projects, they went on a land-buying spree. Soon, they announced around 150 housing towers with exotic sounding names to attract buyers. Besides diverting cash from one housing project to another, they even used the money to fund hotel properties and a clutch of Bollywood films.

Then came the global recession and the generous flow of funds began to dry up. Vaishali Homes never had a robust cash surplus since the money often went into the unfinished projects or was blown away by the Gupta brothers. The firm began to default on project completion — with one project after the other falling by the wayside. Eventually, some of the conned home buyers got together and petitioned the Supreme Court. The court finally gave a deadline to Vaishali Homes to complete the projects. But there was no money left and the firm could not meet the deadline. The court then ordered the arrest of the promoters and handed over the projects to a government-owned construction company for completion.

Danish had studied these details minutely in order not to repeat the Guptas’ mistakes. He walked into his office, gaudily dressed and late as usual. The office too flaunted expensive interiors that were far from classy. But his extremely street-smart ways seemed to make up for everything else. Locking himself in his cabin, he once again went over the Vaishali Homes material that he had been obsessing over for a while now.

To avoid coming under the scanner, he had to maintain a semblance of honour in his commitment to the customers. Money had to be found. Financing companies and banks had become less generous after the Vaishali fiasco. In any case, many of them had over-exposed themselves to bad loans and faced capitalisation issues. Danish had seized upon an idea from an acquaintance.

Most of his customers happened to be Hindu. They bought flats at market rates, which were high, given the demand. Kerala was experiencing a boom in real estate. This Western Ghats locked state had limited space and extensive manpower employed in the Middle East, all of whom were remitting large amounts of money every month. Employment in the Middle Eastern countries was on contract basis and one never knew when one’s time was up. Therefore, all Keralites settled in the Middle East wanted the security of a home when they came back to India.

Some of the flats in a particular tower would be blocked from sale. After the clients shifted to their new homes, the blocked ones would be opened up for sale, and this time to members of the minority community. The new owners (not coincidentally), would have a particular profile in common. They were highly conservative and aggressive about their religion, while disparaging other faiths. Quick to quarrel and hostile in nature, they would create unnecessary unrest in the residential complex, compelling most Hindu residents to move out after disposing off their flats in distress sales. With the rates thus slumping, new buyers would emerge — all from the minority community again. The old owners could not choose their buyers thanks to pressure from local Muslim clerics and a slew of unwanted characters. Danish took a cut from all such deals; after all, he had given these buyers homes at rock-bottom prices. The Hindu home buyers realised they had been duped by Danish but could do nothing about it.

Danish was part of an expansive network of fake currency printing and circulation that he knew was too vast and complex than he would ever understand. In collaboration with a few others, he organised printing of fake notes at Nashik, several hundred kilometres away from his base in Kerala. He was also involved in the distribution of the counterfeit notes to several outlets in his home state. The beneficiaries were radical outfits involved in aggressively spreading Islam. They were mostly student unions, supposed social activists and various banned organisations that continued to function under assumed names. One of them had been involved in brutally chopping off the hands of a college professor who had included a question on Prophet Mohammad in an examination paper. In the past, this group had faced allegations of having contacts with Islamist organisations, kidnapping, intimidation, possession of arms and even forcible conversion of young Hindu women to Islam.

Another such group had organised a series of lectures by a hate preacher who specialised in provoking Muslims against Hindus. When the issue turned too hot to ignore, he was advised to flee the country and conduct his activities from elsewhere. The preacher, always dressed in a suit and tie, with his signature flowing beard and skull cap, promptly relocated to a Muslim-majority country and continued to direct his venom from there. When he created problems there too and demands rose to expel him, he promptly pulled some strings using Islam as a common factor and managed to get temporary citizenship.

These organisations thrived because earlier governments in Kerala had refused to act against them, fearing a backlash from the minority community members and therefore a loss of their vote bank. But when things turned too ugly to be brushed aside, they initiated a half-hearted crackdown. A good number of politicians from the state, whether from the left or the centre, had direct or covert links with the controversial groups.

These radical organisations bought fake notes at half their value and then used them to finance their activities, including the real estate businesses. The notes were printed at Nashik – that has the Currency Notes Press where official Indian currency is printed - to lend the fake notes a touch of genuineness. Danish had invested in a currency printing press in Nashik, replete with reams of printing paper, special ink, laptops, scanners, luminous pens, the works. Several counterfeit notes across the country had been detected by government agencies because they were poor replicas and easily identifiable. He did not want to take chances and procured the best equipment he could, to print notes that copied all the security features of genuine notes rather well. A good part of the money that he had received through bookings in his real estate projects was directed into the fake currency project.

He felt satisfied and ready to step into politics. The Indian political system was the safest place to hide away your corruption at.

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## The Rise and rise of Dalda

By all accounts, Dalpat Dalvi was a successful politician. He made his way to the Lok Sabha (the lower house of the Indian parliament), after a resounding win in the last elections. He came to parliament sessions regularly, having a 90% attendance rate. He frequently had questions listed in his name, some starred and others un-starred, which dealt with pressing issues of his constituency. He participated in debates and discussions on matters of national importance, including internal security and foreign policy. Although not part of the government, he was seen as an ally, leading a regional party. Dalpat was an excellent orator. But he had other less than admirable qualities too. He was considered a slippery character — his friends and critics called him Dalda behind his back. In matters of manipulation, he matched Finance Minister Maida Damodaran, though he could not always come up trumps.

Before entering politics, a decade ago, Dalda had studied Theology, acquiring a master’s degree in the subject. Interestingly, his specialisation was Islamic Theology, which made him a poster boy of the secularists. His next step was a complete surprise when he set up an incense-stick manufacturing unit. Over time, the venture started to do well, and he went on to employ 400 people; there were a thousand others who gained indirect jobs by marketing and selling the incense-sticks. His employees were beholden to him since he paid them well and even extended his generosity to their health and children’s education needs.

As his business progressed, Dalda established the Jijabai Dalvi Public Trust, named after his late mother, which managed a string of hospitals and NGOs that he had floated. The hospitals offered subsidised medical care to the poor and the NGOs supported causes like the education of the girl child and environment protection. It was only a matter of time before influential local politicians began to court him, thus helping him acquire a higher profile. He helped politicians with money and used his goodwill to attract votes for them. But there is no such thing as a free lunch. Dalda asked for and got in return a slew of policies that would help his business grow substantially and work against his competitors.

He had helped enough number of politicians. Being an insider would help his business a lot more, he decided, and plunged into politics himself. Joining one of the existing major parties was out of question; he would have been lost as an insignificant player. He had the money and the influence to start a party of his own. The Jana Shakti Party (JSP) was thus born and Dalda became its founding president. As he had expected, there was no dearth of people who wished to join him, thanks to his many philanthropic undertakings. For local leadership levels, he chose the candidates with care, ensuring that they had a standing in society and were in touch with people at the grassroots. The JSP did not subscribe to any particular political ideology — anything that benefitted the party and its president was good enough. The flexibility also brought the freedom to hobnob with leaders from various parties. He was known to offer support at crucial moments to the one who seemed closest to assuming power.

The turning point came when Dalda contested the parliamentary elections. By then, he had a well-networked organisation at the regional level and could effortlessly convert his appeal into votes. Two other factors worked to his advantage. The first was that Dalda’s principal opponent was too much of a gentleman, who refused to raise populist issues and indulge in personal attacks during the poll campaign. Consequently, his campaign lacked punch and public appeal. The second factor was Dalda’s reach equally among the two major Islamic denominations; one loved him for being an authority on Islamic Theology and the other liked him because he had given gainful employment to many members of their community. Not surprisingly, the JSP chief won by a thumping majority.

This, then, was his public profile that he flaunted with no hidden pride. But there was another side to Dalda Dalvi that nobody knew, except his closest inner circle. The last time he had ever tried hashish was back in college. Thereafter, he lost all interest in recreational drugs. Except, of course, he was the kingpin of one of the largest illicit drug trade networks in the country, which spread from Gujarat to Arunachal Pradesh and Punjab to Kerala. The money that came from the drugs was a high the drugs themselves could never offer.

Dalda’s initiation into the drug trade came about within a couple of years of the boom in his incense-sticks business. At the age of 40, he was still young enough to be rash and exceedingly greedy. He had learned a great deal of manipulation as a businessman and sharpened those skills as a politician.

A favourite manager of his (favourite because he had successfully negotiated a deal with an income tax officer resulting in tax saving of Rs.2 crores) had suggested the idea. The manager was a well-read man. He explained to his boss that India had emerged as one of the major hubs in Asia for a variety of drugs — from the old and tested cannabis to newer ones like methamphetamine. According to a report from an international firm, India was now part of an internet drug club alongside other south Asian nations that traded crypto currencies. Nearly a thousand drug listings from India had been published across several crypto-market platforms, and they dealt with not just opiates like heroin but also more potent ones like acetic anhydride. Often enough, new addictive drugs were being discovered and fed into the ever-expanding market not just across Asia but elsewhere too. The international organisation’s report also pointed out that India, Australia, France, and Turkey together accounted for over 80% of the global production of morphine-rich opiate raw material. Although various nations including India had got together to fight the menace, the tentacles of the drug trade were too widespread and complex to be unravelled.

Dalda resisted the idea for long. A foot into the drug business made perfect business sense but he was wary, not in the least because of any moral scruples. Dalda had none. The reluctance came from the fact that this wasn’t a line he was fully at grips with. And he wasn’t certain about investing his high risk-earned money into it. Besides, if the racket was busted, it would mean the end of his public life. The manager rattled off names of a dozen big-time operators — respected people in the public domain — who were part of the trade and none the worse for it. If they could do it, why not he? There were too many tiers in the business for anyone to ever reach the big guys. At worst, a few ground-level handlers usually got caught.

Dalda was eventually convinced, though his initial investment would only be Rs.5 crores. It was a small sum but just about enough for him to get started. Having treaded the first few steps, Dalda now began to spread his wings. The deeper he went, the more he understood the enormous potential the drug trade held. According to some estimates, India used (abused) 36 tonnes of heroin each year. With the value for a kilogram being in the range of Rs.1 crore, the total market in India worked out to a whopping Rs.36,000 crores.

While Punjab and the North-East were hotbeds of the drug business and Dalda had enough presence there, he was looking to expand business in the south. Kerala was an ideal choice. Unlike the North-East and Punjab, Kerala was still under-saturated with good potential for trade. The second advantage was that the state had been witnessing the rise of Islamic militancy, the activities of which needed funds that the drug business could supply. And the third was the established presence of fake note networks, which again could supplement the drugs trade. With these considerations in mind, Dalda - although based in the outskirts of Mumbai — set about creating his business in faraway Kerala. Years of hard work ensured that he owned a profitable illicit drug trade in the state, among the most successful in all of India. Soon enough, his seed capital of Rs.5 crores had grown into a drug cartel worth several thousand crore rupees.

Kerala, by now, had come to be referred as the country’s drug capital. It was now second only to Punjab in the number of cases registered under the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (NDPS) Act, and also in the number of arrests made. While these figures demonstrated the rapid pace of business in the state, it also showed that anti-drug agencies, despite the fetters placed on them by state and central governments, had managed to inconvenience the illicit business.

Dalda was secure, though, as his manager had assured him, because only the small-time handlers had been caught, who knew nothing about the big names behind the racket. However, while ganja and hashish were the primary substances seized, the ones with greater demand and profitability — heroin, ecstasy etc. — which Dalda was pushing in the state, had so far remained largely untouched. By the time he entered full time politics, his drugs business was firmly rooted in Kerala, with a steady cash flow that ran into millions of rupees each day.

The drugs menace in Kerala was also prompting voices of concern with the state legislative assembly, parliament, the media and social activists. In parliament, Dalda was among the most vocal in condemning the business and castigating government agencies for failing to tackle the issue. He demanded to know what measures the governments planned to take; he said, helpfully, that the government could explain the measures in private so that the people who are to be targeted do not get advance notice. The central government saw sense in his reasoning and acquiesced. Equipped with the advance information, Dalda fine-tuned his drug business strategies to his advantage, always staying one step ahead of the law. On the outside, he continued to condemn the drug trade and also funded a public campaign or two on making youth aware of how bad drugs can be for them.

But the most wonderful irony was that one of the many NGOs managed by Dalda’s trust worked for the rehabilitation of people addicted to substance abuse. Hundreds of men (and a few women as well) took refuge in the NGO’s addiction rehabilitation centre every month. As a result of the commendatory work it was doing, the government had opened its purse strings to the NGO.

Dalda was careful not to misappropriate those funds, as he didn’t want the Home Ministry — and especially the Finance Ministry headed by Maida Damodaran — to come after him.

After all, his entire business empire was erected for the express purpose of someday having enough financial clout to take on the mighty Maida.

# 

## A love story that always had a tragic end

Haji Pir Mohammad read the news item spread across five columns on the front page of an Urdu daily, carefully folded the paper and kept it away. He was deeply satisfied. The Supreme Court had granted relief to a woman who had converted to Islam and married a Muslim youth in Kerala. The allegation was that she had been forcibly converted and the Kerala High Court had annulled the marriage. While setting aside that ruling, the apex court had said that the girl was an adult and free to convert and marry according to her free will. It also found no material to substantiate the accusation of what came to be called as Love Jihad.

Pir Mohammad had played a major role in the affair, ensuring that the conversion-cum marriage was watertight legally, with the insidious design deftly hidden. He was the local cleric who guided his Muslim brethren on a variety of matters. He issued fatwas on how to dress, what to eat, how to perform sex, how to treat women, and even how to belch and fart — all supposedly in keeping with Islamic practices. He was also possessed with a missionary zeal to increase the numerical strength of his community, through procreation and conversion. He dreamt of an Islamic caliphate of sorts, if not in India, at least in parts of Kerala that had a sizeable Muslim population. The influence of communal Islamist outfits was fairly strong in towns like Malappuram, where this incident had taken place.

Pir Mohammad, who had done Haj twice in the last ten years - availing the Indian government’s subsidies for pilgrims - had to personally brainwash the young woman into converting to Islam and marrying a Muslim man. This was essential for two reasons. One, the woman came from a deeply religious Hindu family and needed a great deal of coaxing to let go of her faith and beliefs. By no means an easy task. Two, the Muslim man she had fallen in love with had a dubious past. He had been booked by the police a few months ago in a case of communal rioting, and was already married twice, although he was only 30. Both his earlier wives had left him on accusations of domestic violence and unnatural acts of sex.

Smitha Mohan was the Hindu girl. She met local car mechanic, Sadiq, a few months ago on her way to college when her moped broke down. Sadiq’s garage was close by. It had started with him offering to drop her back home. She was attracted to his good looks and the sparse but strategically thrown in English phrases in their conversation. They met a few more times and love blossomed. She was only twenty and highly infatuated.

Her parents were naturally opposed to the alliance because of the man’s religion and also his all too well-known past. One day, she had simply disappeared from home. After days of painful search, her father discovered Smitha at a safe house managed by a bunch of local Muslims owing allegiance to Pir Mohammad. He alleged abduction and wrongful confinement and went to the Kerala High Court with his appeal. Her father also said that Smitha had been forcibly converted and married off, adding that a larger conspiracy was at play. His argument was that love was being used as a convenient bait, like in many other cases, to lure Hindu girls to convert. Meanwhile, Smitha had assumed her new name, Nafisa Bi.

The Kerala High Court declared the marriage null and void, holding that it had taken place through coercion. But the girl refused to return to her parents’ home. This was not surprising since she was, by now, fully misled under the influence of Pir Mohammad and the claims of love by her ‘husband.’ She maintained that she had left her parents’ home voluntarily and was happily married to Sadiq. She blamed her parents instead, for seeking to ruin her life. The High Court order had to be challenged, and assisted by her new community leaders, Nafisa Bi went to the Supreme Court.

Meanwhile, Sadiq’s past seemed close to catching up with him. The Smitha-turned-Nafisa incident had triggered probe into his activities. The woman’s father had levelled a serious charge against him, which could not be easily brushed aside, though the state authorities under a ‘secular’ government sought to downplay it.

The charge was that his daughter’s abduction, forced conversion and subsequent marriage was one among many such cases wherein women of other faiths were converted to Islam and sent to extremist-controlled territories like Syria as sex slaves, or to be used as human bombs in terror attacks. Smitha’s father had heard this from some of his professor and lawyer friends. It turned out that one of Sadiq’s previous wives had fallen out with him after she refused to go to Yemen for ‘social work’ on an all-expense paid trip. It was that refusal which triggered a spate of violence against her by her husband and his family. When called to intermediate, Pir Mohammad had justified the violence by promptly issuing a fatwa, that a Muslim husband had the right to assault his wife in case she refused to heed his directive in the larger Islamic interest.

The Nafisa Bi matter caught the interest of The National Investigation Agency (NIA), the country’s premier probe organisation on issues related to terrorism. It moved an application with the Supreme Court, seeking an order to inquire into various aspects of the case, which the High Court had famously termed as ‘Love Jihad.’

It turned out to be an inconvenient turn of events for Sadiq and his backers. But they were confident that the apex court would quash the proceedings since they had covered their tracks well. The confidence came from the fact that state authorities, including the police, had been most cooperative towards them, ensuring that every piece of evidence that could potentially impact them, had been tampered with or obliterated. After all, the state regime had opposed the NIA’s probe into the matter.

But the Supreme Court allowed the NIA to proceed with its investigation. Facing non-cooperation from the state authorities and a barrage of motivated accusations from the Muslims led by Pir Mohammad claiming that the NIA was interfering in the community’s personal matters, the probe agency hastily closed the chapter and submitted its report to the apex court. Interestingly, the NIA had earlier reported that it had traced a common ‘mentor’ in a clutch of controversial cases of conversion and marriage.

Regardless of the apex court’s order that gave a clean chit in the Smitha Mohan case, it was more than apparent to Smitha’s father and other like-minded citizens that Love Jihad very much existed in Kerala and in its most forceful form in minority-dominated regions of the state. Even judges who had served in Kerala had noted the alarming trend of young women from other faiths being brainwashed and lured into ‘affairs’ by Muslim men. One of the judges remarked that the case diary in a particular instance had clear suggestions of forceful conversions through a concerted effort, endorsed by certain radical outfits. And it was spreading, with similar incidents reported in neighbouring Karnataka or faraway Uttar Pradesh. But no culprit could be brought to book, simply because there was no evidence against them in any of these cases.

The absence of clear proof led to the strengthening of the left-liberal lobby, which had slammed those who ran campaigns against Love Jihad. The political system, the media, and the academia spoke against it, ensuring safe passage to the Love Jihadists in the process.

Pir Mohammad was happy with the way the Nafisa Bi case had been handled. Had it gone wrong, it would have spoilt the larger game plan he was involved in. There was more than one Smitha Mohan to be converted; it was work in progress. His handlers — agents in Gulf with whom he had come in contact during his Haj visits — were boosting him with frequent rousing sermons in the name of Allah. And large amounts of cash, of course. He had risen from relative obscurity to being a revered figure, both in religious and political circles. He had also become a kingpin of various activities aimed at radicalising Muslim youth in the state.

A large section of Kerala’s Muslims had prospered thanks to the Gulf boom, but many among them were also exposed to radicalisation as a result. They were exposed to provocative material that eulogised Islam and instigated them against other faiths. They were taught that everything was fair when it came to the protection of Islam. Extremist outfits that were behind these activities kept changing their names but not their purpose. Some mainstream parties were involved too.

Reports suggested that Islamist outfits had since been rising undeterred, so much so that even the communists, who had no reservations in siding with them when it came to taking on the right-wing parties, began to feel uncomfortable over time. One of these outfits was the secular-sounding Popular Front of India that was formed in 2006 as a social organisation. Behind the façade was the agenda to polarise society along religious lines and spread communal hatred. It was accused of various anti-social and anti-national activities, including association with Islamist terror groups. Eventually, even the government of Kerala had to take note and told the Kerala High Court that the PFI’s activities were inimical to the safety of the country. The organisation was banned, but the likes of Pir Mohammad continued to flourish.

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## Operation BreakIndia

Pervez Pasha was looking at the graphic pinned on a wall in his office, titled Operation BreakIndia. He was satisfied with the progress his man, Javed Bhatti, was making on all the three fronts that he was tasked to start a few years ago. As the head of the Covert Action Division of the ISI, he was responsible for planning, sourcing and executing destabilisation plans in foreign countries. That Kerala would be a ripe nerve centre to plan and execute his plan was something that he was working on for a while. When posted in Dubai, he had noticed how expatriates from Kerala abounded in various vocations. After a bit of digging, he found that most of them were Muslim and fairly moderate in their outlook.

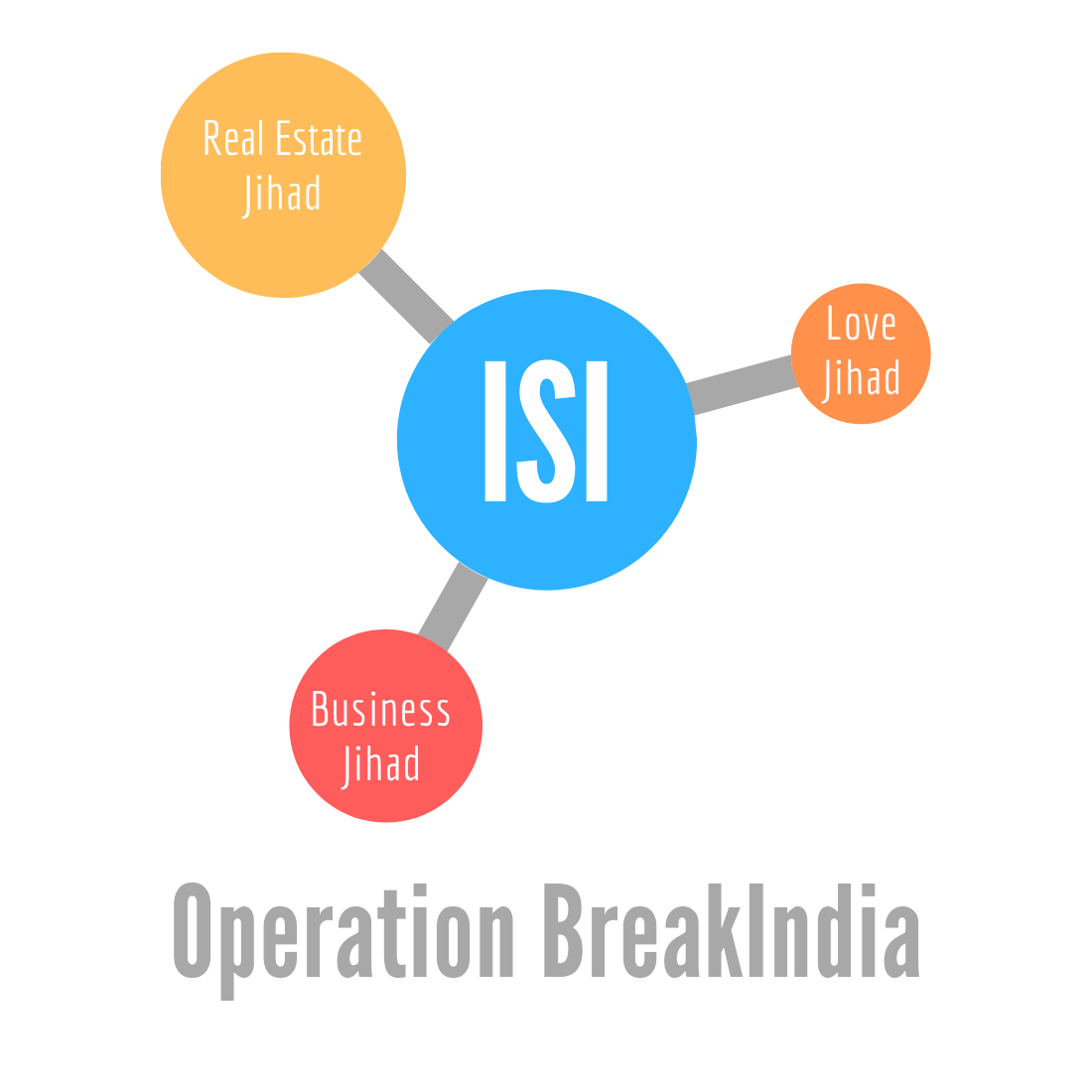


Figure 1. Operation BreakIndia

When Pervez returned to Pakistan, he was shocked to see the spread of Wahabism under Zia-ul-Haq. But a quintessential survivor that he was, he quickly adapted himself to the new reality of Pakistan and would always go above and beyond the call of duty.

After 26/11, a new plan was needed to keep the pot boiling in India. Pervez called his best protégé, Javed, and outlined the broad strokes of Operation BreakIndia. Javed was a quick learner and knew exactly what he had to do. For Business Jihad, especially drug trafficking, work with Dalda, for Real Estate Jihad, Danish Ahmed and for the more complex Love Jihad, Pir Mohammad. Javed was free to improvise as long as the objective was achieved.

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## The incredible volume of Fake Currency

Director, Intelligence Bureau (DIB), M K Srinivasan dealt with matters of national security on a daily basis. He approached the challenge with zen-like composure, unflinched by what he dealt with. But this day was different. Mike, as he was known to everyone including the media, was feeling deeply disturbed. He had already studied the dossier on his table several times and he picked it up again, glancing at the two large bundles wrapped in waterproof casing. Finally, he came to a decision. He asked his secretary to request the Prime Minister’s Office for a half-hour appointment with the honourable Prime Minister, at the earliest.

Mike could have gone to his immediate boss, the Home Minister, but took a considered decision not to. The minister was soft spoken and well intentioned, but he was clearly ill equipped for the position he occupied. The media talked of him more for his sartorial taste — he was known to change four outfits a day — than any ability he was suspected to possess to discharge his onerous duties.

Mike stared at the little metal Indian flag at his table, his totem at all times. Fiercely patriotic, he ignored disdainful pressures on the agency by corrupt politicians and was deeply committed to the welfare of his colleagues who shared his high ideals. He was known to be unafraid of consequences that came as a result of putting the nation first. Ruffling feathers in the process was never a botheration. Mike had chosen the Indian Police Service over a more lucrative IAS career after being ranked 24th across the country in the Indian Administrative Services examination. He was known to have indicated his preference in the form he had filled before taking the examination. A rarity indeed.

He held strongly that most problems the common citizen faced had to do with issues of policing at the ground level. Unscrupulous money lenders milked the poor dry and the police machinery refused to do anything for the victims because it had been ‘taken care of.’ Rich landlords exploited people from lower castes but the local police officials – fully bought over - would not just brush aside the complaints but also implicate the victims in false cases, so that the ‘right lesson’ went through. The local muscleman would send his goons to occupy a disputed property while the police machinery looked the other way. There were several such instances that had enraged Mike and inspired him to join the Indian Police Service. He never imagined that he would one day also head the Intelligence Bureau.

Mike was born in the reservoir town of Malampuzha in Palakkad district of Kerala in a middle-class family and imbued its values. One of those was an inclination towards government service, which was viewed as a service to the nation. His cousins, uncles and aunts had all pursued careers in government jobs. Some of them had risen to ranks high enough to be allotted a car — the ubiquitous Ambassador with a beacon and blaring sirens — and attendants. India was still in the socialist era with a controlled economy back then, when one had to approach the government for licences and permits to manufacture even something as everyday as a pencil. And there too, the government fixed the volume of manufacture and the price for sale. Bureaucrats enjoyed enormous clout in such an environment, which was not an added perk but the primary attraction for working in a government job. But these mundane benefits were far from Mike’s mind when he had decided to follow in the footsteps of his family.

Bright, sharp-witted and an excellent observer, young Mike’s grasp of technology and investigative skills soon began to be noticed and his rise was meteoric. It was not long before that he was in the office of the National Security Advisor, at barely 40. Many had heaved a sigh of relief over this promotion. In one of his earlier postings, he had ruthlessly cracked down on the sand mining mafia, eventually nabbing a powerful politician who ran the operations. There had been a great deal of commotion, with the accused threatening to pull down the government if the officer was not transferred. Mike couldn’t care less.

In another instance, he nabbed an influential journalist on charges of rape, despite the support from the ruling government that the journalist enjoyed. A young female colleague had alleged that he had molested her in an elevator, not once but twice. The ruling party called it a witch-hunt and backed the journalist’s claim that he was targeted for his pro-regime and anti-opposition stand. He even went to the extent of claiming that Mike had become a proxy for his opponents. Unaffected by any of this, Mike and his team pursued the matter relentlessly, resulting in the accused journalist’s trial in a lower court.

But perhaps the most celebrated of his showdowns was with a serving Chief Minister and another minister in the early years of his career. He was then the Deputy Commissioner of Police. He had to oversee arrangements of the viewing of the mortal remains of a venerated saint in the Catholic faith that is put on public display every twelve years. The saint had died centuries ago and his body had been preserved and kept in a local Mumbai cathedral that had become a tourist attraction. All traffic is stopped a kilometre away from the cathedral on this day. That year, when a minister of the state’s ruling party arrived in his official vehicle, he was stopped at the cut-off point, like with all other vehicles. He was requested to walk to the cathedral. Outraged at this insolence, he turned to Mike and demanded the VIP treatment he was entitled to and used to. Mike politely declined, leaving the fuming minister to walk the distance.

The minister was not the forget and forgive variety. He lodged a complaint with the Chief Minister, and Mike was summoned to the Chief Minister’s chamber immediately. The Chief Minister, a seasoned politician belonging to an aristocratic family, asked Mike to allow his ministers’ vehicles to go right up to the cathedral. Mike politely told him that the directive went against the established traffic norms laid down for the safety of the people. If the Chief Minister wanted exceptions to be made, he would have to provide a written order. The enraged Chief Minister, not used to having his orders disobeyed, complained to the centre.

Mike was relieved of his charge and packed off to another city, but his rise was not to be dented. His competence and potential were legend by now, all the way up at the government hierarchies. He was appointed the chief of the Intelligence Bureau when he was only forty-five. It was not unusual for IPS officers to work at the Intelligence Bureau, but someone this young heading the bureau, did not happen every day. It also comprises officials from the Indian Revenue Service and the military. Over the years that he had served so far, Mike had helped crack several cases that could have had serious ramifications for India’s internal security. He had an uncanny instinct to sniff out intelligence from the unlikeliest of places and act upon it with lightning speed.

Mike punched the desk with his fist. Placed before him were two stacks of Rs.1000 notes with near identical features, serial numbers, security threads and colour. To the naked eye, they were identical. That this was even caught was purely accidental. A Kerala-based cooperative bank had deposited currency amounting to lakhs of rupees into the Reserve Bank of India and at the same time, another large stack of Rs.1000 notes had been deposited by a Grameen Bank from Malda, West Bengal. A member of the Visual Inspection Unit was marking off the beginning and ending serial numbers into the RBI computers. The alarm went off when the second stack was entered.

The RBI has set procedures to deal with such instances. The local police in both Kerala and Malda were alerted and the cooperative bank managers were taken into custody. The Maharashtra Police then swung into action and alerted both the Central Bureau of Investigation and the Intelligence Bureau. The high-precision scanning machine at the headquarters of the RBI confirmed the agencies’ worst fears. Both sets of notes were counterfeit but would pass inspection in all but the highest resolution scanners, which were programmed to look for one secret marker that was visible only when beams of Magenta/ Orange/ Blue rays were shone on the note, in that sequence. The colour beams caused a minor reaction on the paper revealing the year the note was manufactured. In these bundles there was none.

Mike received information that the appointment with the Prime Minister had been fixed for five that evening. From all that he picked, he smelled a larger conspiracy involving senior people in the government, perhaps even some ministers. He wanted to report his suspicions to the Prime Minister and leave it to him to take a call. He hoped that all decisions from here on will be made in the nation’s best interest. This is all that he could do, for now.

Promptly at five, Mike was shown into Prime Minister Dhillon’s chamber. The Prime Minister listened to him with the deadpan expression that had become his trademark, only making a couple of sporadic interventions.

“Sir, we have reasons to believe that senior government functionaries, maybe a couple of ministers too, may be involved.”

Jagat squirmed in discomfort. He eyed the bundle of notes warily. He finally said, “Do you have any concrete evidence of such involvement?”

“No Sir. But we have sufficient material to launch a discreet probe,” Mike said, naming a few suspects. He wanted the Prime Minister’s consent.

Jagat rubbed his forehead and said, “Let me get back to you. Leave this dossier behind.” Mike took away the bundles of counterfeit currency.

Ordinarily, the Prime Minister of India should have had no hesitation in ordering a covert inquiry into the possible involvement of some of his colleagues in the murky affair. Unfortunately for him, the real power lay with the party president and it was to her that he would have to turn to for approval, even for a crisis situation of this kind. As Prime Minister, he could not ignore such a serious issue. But if he took a unilateral decision and the party chief came to know of it, he would be pulled up for acting without her consent. She had enough moles within the government and administration. He decided to meet her.

He was under no illusion that this meeting would be any different from the last. After all, the suspects that Mike had mentioned were close associates of the party president, and she would protect them at any cost. While he mulled over the situation, the Prime Minister received confirmation that the party chief would see him the following morning at her residence.

Dipika greeted the Prime Minister with her customary formal courtesy.

“So, what brings the *most important* man in the country to my doorstep?” She said, in a casual sarcastic tone. She, of course, knew in advance. She had been told by an official of the PMO that the Director of Intelligence Bureau had visited the day before and the fact that the Prime Minister had sought to meet with her soon after. Without mincing words, Jagat told her about the fake notes and slipped across the table the dossier the Intelligence Bureau had prepared. Her eyebrows shot up on noticing Finance Minister Damodaran’s name on the suspect list.

“This is utter nonsense, Dhillon ji! The IB report belongs there!” She said, tossing the dossier in the general direction of the trashcan a few feet away.

“Madam, we cannot ignore it. It’s not about one person or another. It’s an issue of national security. Counterfeit currency drives the drug trade. Terrorism too. It’s danger-”

“No, I cannot allow senior ministers to be investigated on the basis of some whim. And this man Srinivasan… Did we elevate him as DIB to create problems for our people?”

It was, of course, not the point. Dipika, who was several years younger to the Prime Minister, nodded to him indicating that the conversation was over. This time, though, in a rare show of defiance, he stood his ground.

“Madam, if you do not step in, I will not hesitate to recommend their names for expulsion from the cabinet. The file will go to the President before the sun sets today. I will then hold a media briefing and let the press know what I am doing. In any case, I will be asking the DIB to go full steam ahead with the probe.” He said it all before he could stop himself.

The party chief was stunned. The last time someone showed such open defiance to her was a long while ago. Her American husband had left her, fed up of her power-hungry political ambitions and minced no words while standing up to her.

“I can see that the puppet has found his voice,” she sneered, angry and amused at the same time.

But the Prime Minister was already on his feet. He made his way to the exit, determined to quit immediately if she tried to create obstacles with his decision to order a full inquiry into the counterfeit notes issue. He asked his driver to head towards his official residence. The Prime Minister’s wife was surprised to see him home this soon and knew in the next instant that something was terribly wrong. Over the next hour, Jagat poured his heart out to her, getting tearful at times, recalling the party chief’s insolence. Despite the bravado he had displayed before her, the fact was that he was not strong enough to carry on.

His wife felt his anguish but was equally worried by the consequences of his resignation. That he would be publicly humiliated by the Freedom Party’s well-oiled publicity machinery was certain. But it would also give free rein to the criminal and corrupt lot within the party and government to wreak havoc with national security. She persuaded her husband to seek counsel with the one man that everyone turned to in times of dilemma: Fali Mistry.

Fali Mistry was a politician, statesman, legal luminary and academic. Most importantly, he was honest; a man whose integrity was beyond question. He held a special regard for Prime Minister Dhillon and shared an excellent rapport with him. He was one of those rare people that the Prime Minister could speak freely with. Jagat dialled his number.

“Fali, I would like to have a word with you. Can you come over for dinner tonight?”

“Prime Minister, your wish is my command. I’ll be there.”

Fali lit a cigar and blew smoke rings in the air. He was a stout man and always wore suspenders for that casual air about him, deceptive of the brilliant mind behind. He had authored three books on Indian politics and written countless articles for leading publications. He didn’t take political sides but had strong views, which he displayed for certain. It was pretty common for a party to be all praises for his opinion about something and the next day, criticise him for his other views. He loved all the attention and the more he was condemned the more he would chuckle with delight. Given his proximity with the Prime Minister, he was aware of the crises the man faced every day. And he guessed the call indicated a flashpoint of sorts that Jagat had arrived at.

Fali loved a stiff drink in the evenings but there would be no alcohol at the Prime Minister’s residence; Jagat was a teetotaller. Just before he left home, he downed a quick one.

He warmly hugged the Prime Minister and greeted his wife. Soon enough, they headed to the study room.

After patiently hearing the Prime Minister, Fali said, “Jagat, don’t make the mistake of quitting. If you do, there are all chances for that slimy Damodaran to become Prime Minister. You know what will happen to the country then.”

The Prime Minister remained quiet.

“There is a chance that Dalda could merge his regional outfit with the Freedom Party and become the Prime Minister even.” Fali said this with a short laugh. “You know that Dipika has a soft corner for him. Surely you don’t wish the country to get into the hands of such crooks?”

“But I cannot function in this helpless state.”

“So, don’t be helpless. Tell Madam that if she does not listen to you, you will begin to leak out information that will not just nail these buggers but also pull her down and ruin her party’s reputation.”

“But that’s blackmail.”

“Hah! Really?”

Fali complimented Mrs. Dhillon over the excellent dinner and belched openly as he took leave of his friend. “Remember all that we spoke about,” he said and winked.

This was the time when the various scams that had been talked up in hush-hush tones, had started to explode in full public view. Prime Minister Dhillon had to move fast.

# 

## The Surface Cracks

The Prime Minister woke up bright and early the next morning. His mind was clear after his conversation with Fali. He would totally bypass the party president this time for the plan of action he was about to initiate. For now, his prime targets would be the Finance Minister and Dalpat Dalvi, two people strongly suspected to have connections with the counterfeit currency game. But to nail them, he needed proof, and needed it quickly. He reckoned that faced with hard evidence — some of which would show up in the media as well — the party chief would be left with no option but to accept and relent.

There was a spring in his step not hidden from his wife. She playfully taunted him: “*Meri jaan*! I see a twenty-something with whom I had fallen in love.” He dressed up earlier than usual and was at his South Block office desk by 7 AM. On his way to office, he called Mike and asked him to meet up in half an hour. Mike was taken aback; he had never been called directly by the Prime Minister on the phone. It was always the PMO through which such calls were routed. A meeting at this hour? He was returning from his jog.

Mike was not the only one to be surprised, though. Prime Minister Dhillon’s driver could not recall a single instance when he had driven his boss this early to office. The office was deserted barring the cleaning staff, and they stepped aside in alarm as they saw the country’s chief executive walk in at the unearthly hour. The Prime Minister made another short call, to Fali. He said, “I have decided to follow your advice,” and ended the conversation.

At 7.30, there was a knock on his doors and Mike stepped in. The Prime Minister got straight to the point. “Srinivasan, I want you to put together an inter-disciplinary team consisting of members from the Research and Analysis Wing, the Intelligence Bureau and the Central Bureau of Investigation. Choose officers who can be trusted completely to maintain secrecy. Not a word should be leaked out — no minister or party functionary, including Madam, need be kept in the loop. And remember, the media just cannot know. You will head the team and report to me directly.”

“Sir,” Mike responded, still unsure of where this conversation was headed.

“There will be no file, either with you or your team. Everything will be strictly verbal. I want to get to the bottom of the fake currency issue. I have read through the dossier you gave me. You have a free hand.”

“Sir, the honourable minister and the honourable MP…”

“I don’t care how honourable they are. If you have material to suspect they are involved, go as far down as you can to collect irrefutable evidence against them. My only advice to you is: Be discreet. I don’t want anyone to be forewarned.”

“Consider it done, Sir,” Mike said, both surprised and pleased with this quick development. “After I have formed the team, would you like to meet and talk to them? It will help.”

“Sure. But it can’t be any of our known safe houses.”

It was finally decided that the Prime Minister could meet with the team at Mauritius, where he was due to take a short vacation two weeks later. There would be no official or security hovering around at the private beach resort he was booked to stay at with his family.

Four days before the briefing, Mike arrived in the Mauritian capital of Port Louis, conveniently to attend an international conference on intelligence gathering methods. A day later, a portly Indian with thick glasses and a bulging briefcase passed through the airport’s immigration counters without attracting a second glance from anyone. He had flown in from Seychelles. The Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam International Airport, located roughly 50 kilometres from Port Louis, bustled with Indians on any given day, who arrived as tourists or on business.

On the same day, a reed-thin man landed from Bengaluru. He was dressed casually, sporting a T-shirt that proclaimed: ‘I love Mauritius,’ and he told the officials at the airport that he would be exploring the enchanting forests of their beautiful country. A day before the meeting, two men and one woman flew in from locations as far away as London, Singapore and California. All of them checked in at different hotels in and around Port Louis.

Surprising for an international tourist location, Port Louis shuts down by 9 PM. As the five men and the woman made their way — separately — to the resort the Prime Minister was lodged in, they encountered sparse traffic. One by one, they trooped into the small study room attached to the suite. The hotel staff was told the visitors were old friends of the Indian Prime Minister’s daughter.

The meeting was brief. Jagat emphasised the need for utmost secrecy and to leave absolutely no paper trail. He commended them for their excellent track record and said they had been chosen to undertake an assignment of the greatest national importance.

“Good luck, then. You would be getting directions from Mike and you will all report to him,” the Prime Minister said. His parting words were: “In your success lies our country’s safety and security.”

Back home through a similar circuitous route, the team members got cracking. Work was divided among them to expedite the investigation, but with enough flexibility to absorb any overlaps. Special attention was to be paid to the Finance Ministry and to Dalda’s dealings, political and otherwise.

They were on the job to also track down any unusual happening in the last few months. During the course of its probe, the team stumbled upon the mysterious disappearance of a middle-level Indian Revenue Service official, Deepak Masani, for nearly four days. He had applied for and was sanctioned casual leave, but no one knew where he was during those four days. Team member, Karan Dixit, decided to dig further. He soon learned that Deepak had an impeccable track record and was one of the finest and most honest officers of the IRS. But he had never before utilised his casual leave for a trip abroad. Although it could be nothing, Karan didn’t quite rest easy. If nothing else, Deepak could help with some important lead to understand the fake currency operations.

Plus, Karan knew Deepak from long ago. They had been schoolmates though a decade apart. They were not really friends but moved in the same circles and were acquainted. When Karan called him for a quick catch up over tea after work, the call came as a bit of a surprise to Deepak, but he instantly agreed.

After some small talk, Karan came to the point. “So were you on holiday at Rio a few months ago? Or was it official?”

Deepak was alarmed. Had he done something terribly wrong? Was he in trouble?

“Don’t worry. This is only a general enquiry,” Karan said, quickly setting him at ease.

Karan had done his homework well and there was no point in being vague. Deepak had been carrying the burden of his Rio visit for a while now and decided to come clean. He gave Karan the full low down, right from Finance Minister Damodaran’s direct orders for him to go to the Amazon to his encounter with the Pakistani official. It was for the first time that he opened his mouth on the Pakistani official before anybody.

As Karan processed this information, it was clear to him that there was a Pakistani ISI angle involved as well. The man Deepak had met could not have been anybody but an ISI agent. He had explained to Deepak the process by which various people would make money in India through multi-level invoicing of the LEPE purchased in the grey market, to be bought by the government of India as a new off-the-shelf product. The mystery man did not tell Deepak the details of the counterfeit currency printing and distribution. And, of course, the role played by his agency.

Mike mulled over the information Karan had brought him. He called a number in Karachi and left a message on voice mail. “The rose has bloomed.” An hour later, there was a similar message on his mailbox: “Spring is around the corner.” Only the two knew that the first message decoded as, ‘Come immediately and meet me’, while the second meant, ‘Okay’. In a couple of days, the man from Karachi, a RAW agent whose declared business was a lucrative car dealership, was in India, ostensibly to explore new business avenues.

Karan had a set of specific questions. One: The quantum of Pakistani currency printed in its state-owned printing presses. Two: The amount consumed for domestic purposes. Three: The destinations to which the excess currencies went. Four: The proportion of counterfeit FICN that the Pakistani presses produced. And five: Connections between the Pakistani state and Indian outfits/ individuals in such deals.

In under a week, he received shocking answers to his questions. He went straight to Mike with the information. It was a detailed report of the huge amounts of fake Indian currency printed in Pakistan and transported to India via Dubai, with a sizeable part landing in Kochi in Kerala. The report mentioned a father-son duo - both prominent politicians in Kerala - who took charge of the consignment and processed it. There were details of the most recent landings.

Karan’s next port of call was Kerala. Over the weekend, he had gathered enough material to push Saga and Harish to the wall, which he did with much relish on meeting them. They put up a show of toughness but turned meek once their bluff was called. It was with a great deal of effort that they had built their political careers and were not inclined to throw it all away. They decided it best to fully cooperate with Karan in his inquiries, provided they came to no harm. That assurance was promptly given, though Karan had no intention to honour it. People like them didn’t deserve such considerations. In an interrogation that lasted ten hours spread over two days, the broad contours of the Kerala end of the racket came into view. And so, did the name of one Ramesh Badri and a few chartered accountants who had been dishing out big amounts of cash to various people for mysterious reasons.

Meanwhile, Mike’s team was pursuing other angles, covering various parts of the country. A scary threesome of fake currency, drug trade and terror funding began to emerge. Kerala seemed to be the hotspot for all three.

Despite utmost discretion being exercised, word had begun to go around. It finally reached the office of the Freedom Party chief. She did not know how much was revealed so far.

Dipika was livid, however. Her party’s government in Kerala depended on the outside support of the regional outfit headed by Saga, and she naturally did not want any trouble to befall on him. Kerala was one of the very few states where the Freedom Party was still in power. She decided to act.

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## A Game Well Played

Sycophants within the party loved her, some genuinely respected her, and there were those who despised her. But there was none who could challenge the strong-headed Dipika. The way she assumed the party presidentship had been a reflection of her ruthless methods. As an ordinary Freedom Party worker, she was no more equal than the million others who were attached to the party, led by Ram Chandra Pal, a veteran who belonged to the most backward Dalit community. But a few senior leaders were upset with his leadership and itching to get rid of him and install her. Needless to say, they had been highly favoured by the Sharma family over the years.

The problem was, nobody seemed to know how this could be done. There was no precedence in the party of sacking an incumbent party president. At first, crude attempts were made to persuade Ram to quit, when the cabal expressed a lack of confidence in him. But the veteran, who had seen many a battle for supremacy in his decades-long career, countered it by having his supporters pass a resolution expressing their faith in his leadership. Knowing that the cabal owed allegiance to Madam, he began to take decisions that were designed to unsettle her. He replaced the most prominent members of the group with his own men. Added to that, he cut down his interactions with Dipika, calling on her only to keep the pretence of formality.

As always, it was the know-all, Boom-Boom Banerjee, who came to the rescue. He dug up a clause in the party’s constitution, which made it possible for the party to get rid of an incumbent chief. The working committee, which was the party’s highest decision-making body, was convened, and Ram was asked to attend the meeting. He got a whiff of the brewing conspiracy but was confident of sailing through. The anti-Ram gang lost no time in moving a resolution that sought his resignation in view of the “changed circumstances” and in order to “take the party to greater heights.” The resolution also placed on record appreciation for his “enormous contribution to the development of the Freedom Party.” Ram was furious. He wanted to speak but was told by the cabal that there was nothing left to be done except to quit. He walked out in a huff, but not before proclaiming clearly that he would not oblige them. Dipika had abstained from attending the meeting.

News had filtered out about the confrontation and the media had gathered outside the party headquarters. There was also a group of workers who began shouting slogans in support of Ram. On being told of the commotion, he stepped outside and spoke to his supporters, asking them to show restraint.

When he returned inside, he was shocked. In the few minutes of his absence, Ram found his chamber locked and his nameplate removed from the wall and placed on the floor. He was told that the working committee had decided to sack him from the post of president and appoint Dipika Madam in his place. He demanded to meet her but was told that she was busy in a series of meetings and would be unable to see him. Sensing no other option, he decided to go home, but found that his official car had been withdrawn as well. A party worker gave him a ride back home on his scooter. A few months later, Ram died of a cardiac arrest and a broken spirit.

Dipika took charge of the party at a time when it was in the opposition. The first task she undertook was to purge the party leadership of elements that were considered close to her ousted predecessor. In their place, she positioned her loyalists, among them being Maida Damodaran and Boom-Boom Banerjee. She then reached out to smaller opposition parties and soon enough, stitched alliances with them to take on the ruling combine. She realised that Ram’s sacking could have repercussions. One, it could jeopardize her party’s regime in Bihar, Ram’s home state. Two, it could antagonise the numerically strong Dalit community which had been her party’s vote-bank for decades. The first, she tackled by winning over smaller parties and shoring up the numbers for the government there. The second, she addressed by announcing the name of a Dalit leader as the Freedom Party’s choice for the country’s next President, the election for the president’s post due in a few months’ time.

The general elections had been announced as well and not many were confident of the Freedom Party coming to power for a second term. But the party surprised everyone by emerging as the single largest majority. It sought and got support from various regional outfits as well as the Left parties. The Freedom Party-led cabinet was sworn in and Dipika was hailed the architect of the victory.

Among the party’s winning candidates was Gulab Sharma. Last heard, he was taking public speaking lessons and brushing up his knowledge about Indian states and their capitals. He had been a less than average student, and various efforts by his parents to enrol him into prestigious educational institutions had been in vain, since he never made the cut. But that hardly gave him sleepless nights. He never had to struggle to make a career.

As a newly minted Member of Parliament, he found himself among a crowd of elected representatives who were far more experienced and also rose from the bottom, struggling their way up. They did not relate to each other. He would have actually been nondescript, but for one fact: He was Dipika’s son. He was asked to contest from a safe seat in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh, though he had no interest in politics. Having won easily, he entered parliament, where again his performance was below average. He did not ask questions or make any meaningful interventions. He attended occasionally, sitting among other young MPs who were also sons of big politicians.

When other parliamentarians would be busy transacting important business, he would take off on long holidays abroad. But the party chief was determined to make something of him, and realising that she would not relent, he began taking some interest in the party’s affairs. But naïve as he was with politics, Gulab often made statements that left the party red-faced and his mother would step in to manage the damage. He had all the perks that came with the family name, with even the senior most leaders bending to his will.

Within months of his stepping into politics, he was made the party’s national general secretary. By this time, the party had come to power in the centre. His mother started to delegate some of her responsibilities to him, partly because her health was a growing concern and mostly since she hoped he would learn through experience. Assembly elections were due in a clutch of important states and she asked him to take charge, right from the selection of candidates to managing dissent to leading the campaign.

“But Ma!” was Gulab’s usual response to everything that Dipika suggested for him. He reluctantly agreed to lead the party and proved to be out of depth in his new role. He also had a small attention span. When senior leaders met him to discuss critical issues, his mind would often be elsewhere, fidgeting with his smart phone or even feeding biscuits to his pet poodle. In the course of electioneering, he would raise issues that had no resonance with the public. The Freedom Party received a drubbing in all the states concerned. Instead of being around to boost the morale of the party cadre, he disappeared abroad for one of his vacations ‘for contemplation.’ Meanwhile, the party, goaded by its chief and his mother, rallied behind him and absolved him of all blame. In one voice, senior leaders claimed that the fault lay with the local leaders who had failed to exploit the momentum and “youthful energy” that Gulab had provided to the party.

In fact, he was even promoted as vice president of the party. By then it was clear that Dipika was grooming him to take over the presidentship from her. The clamour to praise him grew even shriller. Prime Minister Dhillon offered to make him a minister, which he turned down saying that he wanted to remain free to work for the party. His critics ridiculed him for running away from responsibility.

Even as Gulab was struggling (in vain) to prove his leadership mettle, Dipika’s mind was on another challenging matter. The probe that the Prime Minister had got the Intelligence Bureau to initiate, could land her ‘favourite’ ministers in trouble. She had decided to cut the Prime Minister to size. Until now, she had chided him in private, but now a public reprimand was needed. And she had a handle to do so.

A few days ago, the cabinet had cleared an ordinance that proposed to disqualify sitting elected representatives in case they were charge sheeted for crimes that attracted a minimum jail term of two years. The cabinet noted that a court verdict took its time in coming and that the interim period was thoroughly exploited by the accused in the meantime. The ordinance would also address the growing public perception of the Dhillon government being soft on corruption. Some ministers of the cabinet had opposed the ordinance stating that it was too harsh and not respecting the laid down caveat that a person was deemed innocent unless proved guilty by a court of law. They had taken their case to Dipika.

The Freedom Party chief was worried on another account as well. If the ordinance was promulgated with presidential assent, it would adversely impact some of the leaders of friendly parties whose support was essential to keep the central government intact. There was little she could do once the ordinance went to the President, so she proposed that the law be nipped before it reached that stage. She summoned the Prime Minister and suggested that he hold a press conference to dispel the negative impressions about the government, speaking nothing about the ordinance. She said that Gulab would also be present at the press conference to express the party’s solidarity with the government. After the Prime Minister left, she met with her son.

“Stick to this and speak only this. Don’t go overboard or deviate,” she said, preparing him for delivering the blow at the press conference.

She wanted to kill many birds with one stone. One: Show the Prime Minister his place. Two: Snuff out the ordinance. Three: Contain the Prime Minister’s new-found zeal to proceed with the probes against her cronies. Four: Establish her son firmly as the next-in-command.

Seated on the dais at the press conference were the Prime Minister, Gulab and a couple of senior leaders considered close to the party chief. The Prime Minister made the opening remarks, in which he sought to reject the impression that he presided over a non-functional regime or that he was a puppet in his party chief’s hands. He reeled out his government’s achievements, with Gulab heartily applauding. He did not forget to mention the ‘valuable’ contribution that the party chief had made in shaping the government’s policies, which benefitted the last man in the line.

A few desultory questions were asked. Just when the briefing was about to end, one journalist asked Gulab his views on the new ordinance the cabinet had cleared. The first-time MP fished into his kurta pocket and produced a sheet of paper — it turned out to be a copy of the said ordinance. He waved it at the media and said, “The ordinance is a piece of rubbish. It punishes people who have not been declared guilty. It takes away the rights of a representative elected by the people. It should go straight into the garbage can.” He tore it up and tossed the pieces in a trashcan placed strategically close to the dais.

The media reporters were stunned. The Prime Minister had gone ashen faced. As the humiliation sunk in, he realised that he had fallen into a trap that the party chief had laid out for him. The decision of an ordinance lay exclusively with the cabinet, but Jagat had just been told even that was not for him or his government to decide. He stood up and left. A couple of days later, Gulab publicly expressed his regard for the Prime Minister and said that he had only expressed his opinion at the press conference. His intention was never to hurt the honourable Prime Minister of the country.

Everyone knew that the clarification was as fake as it could get. The stage had been set for a larger confrontation.

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## When it rains, it pours

The Indian Premier League (IPL) is perhaps the world’s most successful cricket tournament. Managed by the cash-rich Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI), it features private teams that play against one another in the T-20 format. These teams consist of both Indian and foreign players. The tournament, held once a year across the country, draws big sponsors, with the teams owned mostly by celebrities and corporate houses. The IPL is never short of glamour, even if it’s short of quality cricket. Within a couple of years of its inception, the IPL became a household name.

Soon enough, it also turned notorious for a range of illegalities that tainted the game’s image and embroiled big players in controversies. Over the years, if the IPL has made many careers, it had also destroyed quite a few. But even the most respected players – the retired ones included - refrained from speaking out on the insider truths. Some simply chose to ignore these, while most were silenced with money. In the name of cricket, betting and spot-fixing are the real games that are played even today.

Despite the BCCI’s best efforts, the stink could no longer be contained. The Supreme Court had to step in and order drastic measures. The cricket board’s top decision-making panels were disbanded and a Committee of Administrators (CoA) headed by a former bureaucrat with impeccable credentials, was formed to oversee the board’s functioning. This was a direct fall-out of the IPL mess.

Meanwhile, the IPL itself was savaged by controversies. And not just related to betting and match-fixing, but also allegations that these rackets were being controlled by the D-Company, headed by a terrorist wanted in India and living in Pakistan, Dubai etc. The use of terror funds and hawala money in the IPL became the talking point. A few cricketers, including some high-profile ones, were ensnared in the betting net and sacked.

One well-known IPL team, captained by a legendary cricketer and former Indian captain, was banned for a couple of years from the tournament. The captain later admitted that some mistakes may have been made by the team owners but the players were not to be blamed.

It had all begun with the arrest of three players from this particular IPL team by the Delhi Police on charges of spot-fixing. Days later, a small-time film and television actor was nabbed for engaging in betting and alleged links with bookies. One of the bookies too was arrested; his operations were spread across India and Dubai. Then came the turn of a high-profile personality — a close relative of the BCCI chief and owner of one of the franchises. The cricket board chief had to quit in wake of this development and the IPL’s governing council set up a team to probe the scandal. The probe panel found no wrongdoing by the franchise, but a lower court soon dismissed the clean chit and the Supreme Court refused to reconsider the court’s order.

Much else transpired as the BCCI’s functioning came under a cloud. The apex court set up a panel headed by a retired judge to investigate. After the report was submitted, the court ordered a complete clean-up of the BCCI’s functioning — something that never fully happened. Meanwhile, another court-appointed committee gave its report, which led to the suspension of a few other IPL franchises.

Spot fixing had evolved to a new level in the meantime. Those who had done the fixing knew that a particular bowler would bowl a no-ball, say in the fifth ball of the game. Or that a batsman would give up his wicket on a specific ball in an over. These players would be compensated handsomely for ‘cooperating.’ A network of bookies who worked in turn for big people like the D-Company don took care of the nitty gritties. Failure by the players to keep up their side of the commitment could attract serious consequences of the kind that none looked forward to.

Alongside this was the betting racket. A typical betting operation had four key elements — the handler, the bookie, the bookie’s immediate boss and the kingpin. The handler locates himself in what is called a ‘betting box.’ Through this facility, he is in constant touch with a number of bookies. The bookies, in turn, interact with players that have been identified before as having the potential to spot-fix. The handler discusses with the bookies the betting rates and also records conversations for further money transactions between them. The betting trends are often shared online through specially designed online applications. For instance, the Uttar Pradesh police had busted a racket that used an online application named Orange. Most of these bookies have connections abroad, especially Dubai and Pakistan, where the kingpin is situated. The deadly cocktail of betting and spot-fixing generates huge amounts of money.

This is a low cost, high return business. The operators need only a few computers, mobile phones (the burner types) and internet connectivity. Much of the business is also carried out on WhatsApp. The Andhra Pradesh police had stumbled upon this method, when four bookies were taken into custody. A WhatsApp group had been formed by some engineering students who had invested large sums of money into it. Those who wished to join the group were asked to cough up amounts ranging from Rs.5,000 to Rs.25,000. Once the money was invested, the bookies would give them passwords through which they could access their accounts and conduct the business. Elsewhere in Kolkata, seven men, who were conducting betting operations on a large scale from a residential colony, were held as well.

Given that the monies involved in betting and spot-fixing are not accounted for, most of it is usually black money; worse still, counterfeit currency. While there are no accurate figures of the amount of money involved in a game, conservative estimates by experts have put the number at least Rs.10,000 crores per match. Bookies don't keep their accounts in a centralised data base. The details of bets are manually entered in ledgers and account books that are not available to anyone else.

While there is a fixed minimum amount that one can take bets for, there is no upper limit. Big-time bookies take bets worth crores of rupees. You can bet Rs.10 *khoka* (Rs.1 crore being equivalent to one *khoka*) or even 100 *khoka*; it depends on your paying capacity, and on whether the bookie can handle that amount. If the bookie cannot handle a Rs.100 crores bet, you can divide the betting money with other bookies.

Over the years, a method evolved to the madness. There are two ways to bet in a cricket match. The first is to bet on the outcome of the match itself, where a bookie bets money on his team. The other is based on the outcome of each set of six overs. For example, one can bet on 60 or 80 runs being scored in the next six overs. The arrest of a leading pace bowler in connection with the six-over spot fixing had created quite the scandal.

The betting game is a proper industry with its own rules. A bookie will not take bets from an unknown person. People are taken in only through proper referrals. The bookie makes his profit from those who lose money placing the bets. And when a particular over is fixed, either from the batsman’s or the bowler’s end, the ordinary betting man loses money, while the network, which is part of the fixing, makes windfall gains.

The IPL scandal had attracted Mike’s attention, who was a cricket-lover but disdainful of the T-20 format. He was pretty vocal about his views and often said that the 20-20 overs game was an insult to test cricket legends like Sunil Gavaskar, Geoffrey Boycott, Clive Lloyd, Vivian Richards, B S Bedi, E A S Prasanna, Ian Chappell or Andy Roberts.

It was not the flamboyance of the IPL that had attracted his attention though, but a phone call from the Commissioner of Delhi Police. The police chief told him that a huge cache of currency had been seized from a hawala operator and nearly 50% of it had been fake notes. The hawala agent spilled all beans after a beating from the police interrogators. He had told them of his links with the betting-spot fixing racket and added that part of the money recovered was meant to reconcile payments to various persons connected with the game — cricketers, cricket administrators, bookies, handlers, franchises etc.

By then, Mike’s crack team had already made considerable progress in drawing connections between drug money, terror funds and fake currency. The team had also managed to trace a few links to powerful people in the government and the administration. The latest revelations fitted neatly into the overall picture and Mike quickly updated his team on the IPL angle.

But there was a setback too. Soon after the police managed to extract primary material from the hawala operator and was prepared to grill him more extensively, the police headquarters received a call from Dalda, the powerful regional party leader and Dipika’s close ally. The police had to release the hawala agent. This was good news and bad. Bad because the hawala agent would have to be released. And good because it was now confirmed that the wheels of power had begun to move for the foot soldiers so that the top guys could not be reached. The Prime Minister had to be informed.

Prime Minister Dhillon received the news calmly and asked Mike not to buckle under any pressure. In normal circumstances, he would have asked his Home Minister to intervene and ensure that the Delhi Police were allowed to do their job, but he knew that the Home Minister would go running to Madam first. The Prime Minister made it clear to the Delhi Police Commissioner that he was not to take orders from anyone but him.

In any case, these were minor issues compared to the big moves that Dipika was plotting in the meantime.

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## The making of Maker Funtoosh Wirewala

Few lives pan out in as perfect a trajectory as Maker Funtoosh Wirewala’s did. Born into an upper-middle class family with highly placed parents can be quite the perfect setting. His father was an Indian Foreign Service (IFS) officer and mother, a psychologist. His grandfather had been a resourceful entrepreneur during the British colonial rule, supplying the government metal products used for making barbed wires. It was a successful business, but he was determined to keep his only son away from it. He wanted to give the child the best education his money could offer and to see him contribute to the new India being shaped in the post-independence era.

Maker’s father had been a bright student since school. Within months of completing college — he scored the highest in his batch and was awarded a gold medal in academics — Maker’s father took the civil services examination. By the time the results were out, India had gained independence and soon the services would be re-designated as the Indian Administrative Services. Not surprisingly, he had done exceedingly well. He loved to travel, meet people, understand new cultures, and the IFS suited his desires perfectly. Besides, of course, he was fascinated with diplomacy; he believed fervently that war was a direct outcome of failure of diplomacy. He loved dappling in the finer nuances of diplomacy and the intricate interplay of various strands of thought.

Maker’s mother was associated with one of the country’s most prestigious medical institutes and considered an authority on cognitive processes. She was among the pioneers in what has come to be known as the ‘humanistic approach’, which emphasises on the importance of subjective experiences and personal growth. As a child, she had nurtured the dream to be an airline pilot but the chances of a woman becoming one in those days were next to none. She later decided to become a model, an idea that was quickly shot down by her conservative parents.

To purge her mind of such dangerous thoughts, her devoutly Catholic Christian parents sent her off to a seminary where she could study both theology and general subjects. The rigorous discipline at the seminary, enforced by stern-looking nuns, had a bearing on her young mind that was quite different from what her parents had hoped for. Once out of the cloistered seminary, and having received her college degree, she took off on a solo exploration of the country, much to her parents’ disappointment. She then committed the ultimate act of rebellion by marrying a young Parsee who she had met over her bohemian travels across India. What was more, she even converted to Zoroastrianism. The two settled down in what was then Bombay.

It was in this exciting background that Maker Funtoosh Wirewala was born in Mumbai. His father was posted in the UK and his mother had taken up an assignment at a local hospital. Maker’s first eight years were thus spent in the UK, where he acquired a clipped British accent, the dry English wit, and a penchant for bombastic (often offensive) words to convey the simplest of meanings. Participating in a school debate, he called his rival’s arguments “asinine” and “moronic.” The sesquipedalian choice of words would become his trademark till years later. While in public office back in India, he had once referred to vast masses of ordinary Indians as “cattle-class,” triggering widespread condemnation.

After his parents returned home to India, Maker was packed off to the prestigious Doon School in Dehradun, the hill resort in the flap of the Himalayas. He was not a particularly great student, but not dull either. In the end, he did well enough to gain admission to another reputed institution, St Stephen’s College in Delhi. By then, other facets of his personality had begun to flower. He had turned into the typical tall, dark, handsome young man that novelist Barbara Cartland described her heroes to be. His sex appeal lay in his thick black wavy hair that he tossed back with a nonchalant flourish. His green eyes and a defined jaw that went with a robust built only added on. If the girls in college sought him out, he collected many flings too, with none converting into a proper relationship.

As debating captain of his college, Maker had further occasions to not just hone his sexual prowess but also to floor his opponents with his characteristic use of the English language. Maker’s next destination was Oxford University, and he went on to do his doctorate on his favourite subject - international diplomacy.

Maker Funtoosh Wirewala wanted to change many things, but the one he could not was his name. He detested it and often complained to his parents, but they were insistent on his retaining it. They would hear nothing of the options he presented — even the compromise formula that he would keep ‘Maker’ and suffix it with ‘Funwire.’ It sounded more British, he explained. But they would have none of it and he remained Maker Funtoosh Wirewala.

At some point in his life, he decided to maintain a Black Book, which had names of all previous girlfriends of various capacities and tenures. He realised with some relish, as the list began to grow, that he had been eclectic in his taste. Region, religion, caste and community barriers had been broken. From Kanyakumari to Kashmir and from Gujarat to Arunachal Pradesh, he could count on at least one woman from belonging to all Indian states, that he had bedded. And his exploits extended to far beyond the geography of the Indian subcontinent.

Wherever he went, he charmed many with his rakishly good looks and the ability to turn simple English phrases into lofty thoughts. For instance, ‘*The early bird gets the worm, but the second mouse gets the cheese*.’ He would twist it into *an instance of an early-rising member of the Phylum Chordata family having an exceptional tendency to snare its prey; au contraire, in the case of vermin, a lactose-condensed-product is usually bagged by the one coming in Numero Duo position.* A bit of French and Latin thrown in for style only seemed to add to his appeal.

His Oxford credentials had helped him land a job with the United Nations, much to his delight. Among other things, there was no more need for him to travel to different countries for his romantic pursuits. Along the way, he had a couple of failed marriages as well, but that hardly slowed him down. Even when married, he had a roving eye. His stint at the UN was less than exceptional. India was not the power it would become in the years to come and its representatives were not in the inner circle of the powerful. It was a fringe player at best. Maker wasn’t, therefore, taken very seriously at the UN, though he impressed many by his flamboyance. He often tried to punch above his weight.

There was one decision Maker took, which was to give a new and decisive twist to his career. He began to cultivate Dipika and her ruling coalition, impressing upon them his usefulness as an ambassador at large. The Freedom Party, readily taken in by foreign-educated Indians - many of whom had been inducted into the party and the government - gave him its fullest attention. Most of it, undeserving.

Maker was stagnating at the UN and the number of failed marriages, alimonies and parental obligations had punched a deep hole in his pocket. He needed to augment his income and for that he sounded out Dipika for a role in the government. He sold her the old story that after years of living abroad, he needed to come back to his roots, his motherland. He ticked off several boxes in the Freedom Party’s setup – a member of the minority, foreign educated diplomat returning to serve in India, a charmer with the Lutyens Ladies… the list was long.

The party chief was willing, but first he had to become a member of either the Lok Sabha or the Rajya Sabha within six months of becoming a minister. Getting him elected through a popular vote for the Lok Sabha was difficult. A safe Rajya Sabha seat was found, ‘adjustments’ made with partners who were initially unhappy at being made to back an outsider, and eventually Maker sailed through.

It was time to rake in the benefits. Maker came up with a fantastic idea for himself and for the party president as well. Why not invest in an IPL team? Dipika and her family were reluctant. They knew little about the business of the game. But Maker assured them that they would not stand to lose in any way; he himself was planning a foray in the game. The Freedom Party chief agreed after some intense persuasion, during which Maker used his famous charm to convince the family. The existing teams already had owners, so the BCCI was asked to add two new teams to the IPL fold. They would be effectively owned, through a complex ownership pattern, by Dipika and her family, and by Maker.

The IPL chief was promised ‘handsome returns’ if he did the favour, but he refused to take the bait. He soon began to receive threatening messages on his phone, with more than a windowpane at his house shattered by mysteriously appearing miscreants. One day, Dipika’s son Gulab called and ‘requested’ him to be reasonable. The alternative, he added, would not be good for him. The IPL chief, finally cracked under the pressure, quit his post and relocated to a country with which India did not have an extradition treaty. Two new teams were subsequently added to the IPL, after the tweaking of some laws that governed the BCCI.

The Prime Minister had no time for cricket. But his interest in IPL stemmed from the recent briefing he had received from Mike. Maker had figured prominently in those briefings. The Intelligence Bureau chief had also received information about huge sums of money being laundered through the IPL route and that Maker had been quick to associate himself with the racket. A Canada-based socialite, Shilpa Kaul, had been identified as one of the recipients of the laundered money, meant for Maker. Once news of this association broke out in the media, Maker was forced to step down as minister and go abroad to escape the heat.

He bounced back soon enough, though. The next thing people heard was that he had married Shilpa Kaul and returned to India. Initially, he received a frosty welcome from Dipika and the party. He was held responsible for the embarrassment they had had to face after the scandal broke out. But Maker convinced them that he had acted in their interests. Had the matter not been blown out of proportion in the media, there would have been no problem.

Maker knew too much about the family’s dealings, not just in IPL but also in certain other property matters. It made sense for Dipika to keep him on her side. All was thus forgotten and forgiven too.

As unthinkable as it may have seemed to her at first, some of Maker’s charm had eventually rubbed off on Dipika as well. She dialled his number on her private phone. As much as she would have liked a dinner date in a luxury restaurant with him, it was unimaginable. “The farmhouse. Eight tonight.” Their usual code for the private location where they had been meeting as of late.

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## Hard Politics takes over

The Prime Minister’s instructions to Mike were clear. Now that he had enough material that could be used to fix the likes of Finance Minister Damodaran and Dalpat Dalvi, he should make friendly calls to the Central Bureau of Investigation and the Enforcement Directorate to share the information with them. More importantly, the Intelligence Bureau chief must, off the record, share the damning evidence with the press and make it known that it could be used without disclosing the source. But the media must get the info in sensational little nuggets so that interest in the story was sustained.

Soon, the media began to carry ‘inside information’ about a deep and flourishing racket in counterfeit currency, drug trade, terror funding and IPL money laundering. Various other reports spoke of the nexus that had been unearthed by government agencies among people in high positions and the patronage that these people offered. Then there were “unconfirmed” reports, of the possible involvement of senior ministers, and one media story also mentioned Maida and Dalda in passing.

Delhi-based media houses dispatched their senior reporters to Kerala for ‘exclusive’ stories, because all information seemed to point to Kerala as the hub of wrongdoing. The media also began to question the credibility of the Dhillon government in the wake of these exposes. Public pressure began to mount on the Prime Minister to act, and the opposition parties ridiculed him ever so constantly, for remaining a mute spectator.

Dipika slammed another newspaper on her desk. She knew by now that the Prime Minister was behind all of this. What she could not understand was, why would he kill his own image? Although he seemed to have lately acquired a measure of independence, she could not see him rake up the courage to act against the Finance Minister. Also, he was showing no signs of quitting in a bid to salvage his reputation.

As the media and opposition pressure continued to mount, the Prime Minister called a meeting of the cabinet, where it was decided to ask the CBI to take over the investigations on the charges that were now in the public domain. Expectedly, the biggest resistance came from Maida, who was enraged that the Prime Minister should take notice of “unsubstantiated” and “baseless allegations” to order an inquiry. The Prime Minister countered him in his typical mild manner. “Damodaran ji, let there be a probe. Since you are not involved, you will come out clean. That is good for you, and good for the government.”

Soon after the cabinet meeting ended, the Finance Minister rushed to the party chief’s residence. Dipika called up the Prime Minister.

“What is all this, Dhillon ji?” she said, without bothering to mask her anger.

“Madam, a CBI probe is the only way out for the government and the party to retrieve their prestige. Plus, the CBI will not come out with a report immediately. The general elections are barely a year away. The party could benefit if it was seen as acting in a transparent manner-”

“Leave the party’s image to me. You please focus only on your work.”

“Madam, there are other issues that could land the Finance Minister in trouble. This CBI probe could at least keep public attention away from those matters.”

“What issues?” she asked, trying not to sound perturbed. This sure sounded like blackmail. The man’s nerve!

“The Foreign Investment Promotion Board (FIPB) has cleared some proposals in excess of the amount that it is authorised to do,” Jagat said with a measure of confidence. “The matter never came to the cabinet for approval. The Finance Minister’s signatures are on those proposals. Taken together, the amount runs into several hundreds of crore rupees.”

Dipika hung up on the Prime Minister of India.

She couldn’t care less about Maida’s fate, but the man was privy to information about her family’s multiple property deals, and if she was not seen to be protecting him, he could cause her a great deal of inconvenience. She summoned an urgent meeting of the party’s working committee. Prime Minister Dhillon was among the attendees. One of her sycophants said the government had acted in haste in recommending the CBI inquiry, a line that was promptly picked up by a few others. It was suggested that the cabinet reconsider the decision. As a face-saver, Maida would be asked to resign; he would be accommodated in the party as one of the vice presidents. It would be said, by way of explanation, that given the impending elections, his services were required by the party on a full-time basis. Dipika thereafter concluded the meeting.

The Prime Minister had been isolated at the working committee meeting. Even those who had endorsed the decision to order the CBI probe in the cabinet meeting had jumped ship. If he resigned, he would make way for someone like Maida to become the Prime Minister.

The government would not fall (he was no heavyweight to trigger a split in the party), and nothing would change except that he would be left out in the cold. If he continued in his post, he would have to swallow his pride and reverse the earlier cabinet decision. His thoughts went back to the conversation he had had with Fali, who had advised him not to do anything that would bring the prime ministership to Maida.

Jagat went home from the party meeting and although it was his relaxation time, he called Mike. The brief was simple. Proceed with greater speed. He then asked his media advisor to tell the press, informally, that the Prime Minister was being brought under pressure to reconsider his decision on the CBI inquiry.

Newspaper headlines the following day brought a smile on the Prime Minister’s face and a frown on Dipika’s. Matters were spinning out of control. She asked for an urgent meeting with her son. Gulab was busy playing with his poodle in his plush bedroom, even as a group of party workers sweated it out, waiting for an audience with him downstairs. He finally walked in, with hardly an apology. His mother came straight to the point.

“Gulab, now is the perfect time for you to start preparing to become the Prime Minister. Jagat Dhillon would be asked to go.”

“What!”

“If he did not cooperate, he would be reminded of Ram Chandra Pal’s fate.”

“Who was Ram Chandra Pal?”

“Oh come on Gulab! Get serious. You will be the next Prime Minister of India!”

“But Ma!”

The Prime Minister was oblivious to this development, but he had already made up his mind. He called for a cabinet meeting. His ministers trooped in thinking that the meet had been called to rescind the earlier order for a CBI probe.

They were in for a shock. Jagat stood up, tall and firm. After a moment, he launched into an hour-long monologue on how the image of the government had suffered over the past few months. He told his colleagues that people had begun to question the government’s legitimacy on the premise that the Prime Minister was not seen to be in charge. There were snide remarks that he did not enjoy the confidence of his cabinet colleagues.

“Let us settle this matter for good. I would seek a vote of confidence for my government in the Lok Sabha,” the Prime Minister said.

Taken aback by this new twist, the ministers began to fall over one another to impress upon the Prime Minister that they had complete faith in him and that their loyalty was beyond question. Jagat smiled inwardly at the hypocrisy. He said, “I am a politician by accident and a Prime Minister too. You have been very supportive of me so far. Please indulge me one more time.”

The Speaker of the Lok Sabha was informed of the cabinet’s decision that the Dhillon government would take a trust vote in three days’ time. Dipika learnt of it when the news broke on TV and wondered what this new drama was all about now. But then Jagat had just a few days to go and he might as well indulge himself. For the record, a statement was issued welcoming the Prime Minister’s decision, which further said that the party was certain he would gain the vote of confidence and provide his sagacious leadership to the country till the end of his term.

For Madam, the announcement on the trust vote came as a golden opportunity to get rid of the now increasingly assertive (and therefore inconvenient) Jagat Dhillon. With a snap of her fingers she could ensure that her party MPs voted against their own government. But she also understood that it would offer the outgoing Prime Minister a martyrdom status and ruin the party’s image even further in the public eye. It would be far better to out-manoeuvre him within the walls of the party. She decided to stick to her original plan.

Meanwhile, Gulab was developing cold feet. It was one thing to work under the shadow of his mother and pull the levers of power, and quite another to actually be in the driver’s seat and lead from the front. He loved the concept of power without accountability. He was also worried that his own failings would become obvious once he assumed prime ministership. Since he could not admit to these fears in the open, he tried to persuade his mother to change her mind.

“Don’t you think it would be better to manage a puppet Prime Minister than the country?” Gulab said.

“That puppet has outlived its purpose,” Dipika said firmly. “Yet another puppet, this close to an election, is not a good idea. It’s time you grew up Gulab! What are you so afraid of, really?”

He fretted, fumed and sulked, but it seemed he could not escape. He had no choice but to bite the bullet. Secretly, he wished for something to happen that would torpedo the plans his mother had for him.

The parliament buzzed with excitement on D-Day. The Prime Minister had arrived early and taken his seat. His ministerial colleagues in the Lok Sabha and other MPs trooped in, with the opposition members wondering what was really going on.

The 24X7 electronic media was reeling out various possible situations that could emerge — the most interesting of them being: What would happen in case the government lost the vote of confidence? The possibility could not be ruled out, said political experts on TV talk shows, because Madam seemed upset with the Prime Minister. The other point of discussion was: In case the Dhillon government secured the trust vote, would it embolden the Prime Minister to go for the jugular and fix his colleagues, both in the government and those supporting the party from outside? Especially those that had been named in the media exposes in a variety of scandals? Can a victorious Prime Minister cut his party president to size?

At precisely 11 AM, the Speaker called the House to order and asked the Prime Minister to introduce his resolution for a vote of confidence. The resolution was moved and discussion began. Jagat made a brief introductory speech, which was followed by speeches from other MPs, both from the opposition and the treasury benches. At the end of a seven-hour long debate, during which Gulab remained conspicuously silent, the trust motion was put to vote.

But before that, the Prime Minister took the opportunity to indulge in yet another of his long monologues and this time about the importance of honouring the faith that the people had reposed in him and his regime. He expressed his commitment to probity in public life and said his government had taken decisions in the past few weeks to live up to the highest ideals that the founding fathers of the Indian constitution had set. The government sailed through comfortably and several MPs rushed to congratulate the Prime Minister.

Four days after the vote of confidence had been successfully taken, Jagat was summoned to the party president’s residence. It was time to deliver the blow. He arrived to find Madam’s cabal in full presence.

“So, Dhillon ji. You must be rather happy with the way the trust vote turned out.” Dipika said.

“You could say that Madam.”

“Since you got what you wanted, I think it’s time you took a step back now.”

Jagat remained silent.

“I want Gulab to take charge as Prime Minister,” Dipika said firmly. Everyone around murmured in agreement. Gulab squirmed inwardly but grinned when his mother looked at him.

Jagat took a deep breath and said, “I would be pleased to do so, Madam. Please just give me a couple more days.”

Dipika looked satisfied. “Sure,” she said. Let him enjoy being the Prime Minister for a couple of more days, she thought. What difference could that make?

As he settled in his car, the Prime Minister called Fali and was already on his way to meet him. Jagat was in the mood for a conversation over a late lunch with his old friend.

# 

## The Most Unexpected Masterstroke

After the plates were cleared and dessert served, Fali asked: “So, what next?”

Jagat did not have to update him on the developments so far; the supposedly retired politician was so well connected; he knew everything that was worth knowing in Lutyens’ Delhi. He had his sources everywhere.

He knew, for instance, that Madam had asked Jagat to resign. He also knew that Jagat had been the man to initiate the recent spate of investigations at breakneck speed. More than anything else, Fali was aware that the Prime Minister, having come this far, could not possibly retreat. But even with his vast understanding of Indian politics and his sharp intellect, he could not guess Jagat’s next move.

The Prime Minister had come here with a purpose. He wanted to get Fali’s reactions to various scenarios.

“You must be aware that I was asked to quit?”

“That I am.”

“I need to do what I need to in the next couple of days.”

“To say that you are rushed for time would be an understatement.”

“Should I go?”

“What does your heart say? More importantly, your head?”

“If I refuse, my cabinet will rebel against me. My party will not back me either.”

“That’s for sure.”

“Anything you are unsure of?”

“Your next move!”

“Can you not guess?”

“I could have, some months ago. But I see you have changed of late. I’m unable to read you anymore.”

“You are to blame for that.”

“Oye, don’t blame me. You should be giving me credit, instead!”

The light-hearted banter continued for some more time. It was getting late. The Prime Minister had plans to return to his South Block office for a couple more hours before calling it a day. He had important work to do. Fali saw him to the door and his parting advice was, “Whatever you do, make sure you outsmart them.”

As always, the Prime Minister felt at ease after a conversation with Fali. Not that he needed validation for his next move, but he was surer of what he was about to do, nevertheless.

His staff was surprised to see him back at office. There was hearsay floating already that their boss was on his way out, following Madam’s diktat. He cleared the routine files on his desk but kept decisions on the more important ones pending. He noted just one word on those files: “Discuss” and passed it on to his principal advisor, from where they would commence their onward journey to the various secretaries concerned. Around eight in the night, he called his staff, from the principal secretary down to the peon, thanked them for their support, and wished them luck. It was clearly a farewell. The Prime Minister then drove back home.

Around the same time, Dipika was closeted with her political secretary, Javed Patel, working out the would-be Prime Minister Gulab’s new ministerial team. Gulab joined them an hour later. Nearly 40 candidates had been provisionally finalised. Gulab insisted on a few other names, young MPs who were close to him, and his mother relented on all but two. She pointed out that the grandmother of one of them had been a prominent leader of the main opposition party, the People’s Voice. Moreover, the MP’s late father, who had been in the Freedom Party, had turned rebel. She feared the MP shared his father’s brash streak.

Dipika’s objection to the other MP was that he had shown scant regard for veterans and could turn out to be unmanageable. On his part, Gulab objected to the names of some senior leaders who were on the wrong side of seventy. He complained that they had never taken him seriously. A compromise was eventually reached, with the list containing a mix of youth and experience. Javed Patel too was rooting for some of his own candidates and managed to get three in the final list. It was past midnight when he left Dipika’s residence.

The following day was frenetic as expected. The Prime Minister reached his office around eleven and asked his principal secretary to organise a cabinet meeting for five that evening. The ministers were not surprised. It was a formality; he would thank his colleagues and wish them well. The party chief came to know of this as well and was happy that everything was proceeding as planned. She expected Jagat to announce his resignation at the cabinet meeting and proceed to meet the President of India to submit his resignation. She had also come to know that the Prime Minister’s Office had sought an appointment with the President for seven that evening.

The cabinet meeting commenced on schedule and Prime Minister Dhillon delivered a brief speech, during which he thanked his colleagues for their cooperation all through his tenure and said his government had worked to the best of its ability. He also expressed praise for the party chief who had ably guided the government in times of crisis. Jagat then delved into his own past, the circumstances that had led to his becoming the Prime Minister, and the challenges he had faced in managing a disparate coalition. There were suitable nods from everywhere in the group. The atmosphere too turned expectedly sombre, with a couple of ministers in the fringes glancing at their watches already.

The Prime Minister paused for a long moment and took a deep breath. “We have come a long way together. So, as I stand before you, I would like to ask you. Do you still hold trust in me?” he said.

People started to sit up straighter now, and everybody said ‘yes’ finally, and Jagat thanked them profusely, hand on heart.

And then this:

“I am going ahead to submit my resignation today and recommend the dissolution of the House. I request you all to endorse the move.”

They were properly shocked by now. This was a clear deviation from the script. Someone from the back was heard saying, ‘Could you please repeat?’

“An early election could be beneficial to the party and our prospects. I firmly believe that only another election can save the party’s fast deteriorating image.”

Maida was the first to recover. “Sir, but what about Madam…”

“I have already discussed the matter with her.”

He was being economical with the truth. He had indeed discussed his resignation but not the dissolution of the Lok Sabha.

By the time Dipika was told about this, it was too late for her to intervene. Prime Minister Dhillon was already on his way to Rashtrapati Bhavan to meet the President, submit his resignation and call for the dissolution. The President was equally taken aback, and he had no option but to accept the recommendation of a government that enjoyed a majority in the House.

The electronic media had a field day, reporting with urgency on every sensational detail of the developing story. Soon, experts began to see a pattern in Jagat Dhillon’s actions of the past few days. His vote of confidence was deemed a master stroke, the perfect foundation to his decision to propose dissolving the House. In one deft move, he had contained the ambitions of the party’s first family and its cohorts. The man who had torn the government’s ordinance unceremoniously in public would no longer become the Prime Minister.

Unlike people like Gulab and Maida, Jagat had no political ambitions. He was bidding goodbye to politics, in any case.

All of Dipika’s loyalists, including senior ministers, had gathered at her residence. Everyone seemed clueless on how to address the situation. The party chief was livid, turning her rage towards Maida and the Home Minister for failing to checkmate Jagat Dhillon at the “blasted” cabinet meeting. Somebody said, “But Madam, the Prime Minister had clearly stated that he had discussed the issue with you.”

Maida started to get a tad too passionate, if not dramatic. “I never imagined that puppet would indulge in this kind of Machiavellian tactics!”

Consumed with silent rage, Dipika started to see a conspiracy by some of her loyalists to prevent her son from becoming Prime Minister. Boom-Boom Banerjee remained silent, and Dipika wondered what was cooking in his shrewd mind. She looked at him enquiringly.

He said, “The deed is done and cannot be undone now. The party should start preparing for elections.”

The puppet Prime Minister had left the party with no choice but to face an early and indeed challenging election.

The newspapers of the following day were replete with detailed stories of this sudden political tsunami. *The Times of India* noted that Jagat Dhillon’s parting blow had shattered the family’s dream and pushed the Freedom Party into an early election for which it was not prepared. “Dipika Sharma has no one to blame but herself for pushing the Prime Minister into this daring act. With the party’s image at an all-time low, it will be a Herculean task for her to revive the fortunes in the coming polls.” *The Indian Express* remarked that the mild-mannered Dhillon had, for once outsmarted Dipika and her supporters. “Beware of the wrath of a righteous sardarji!”

*Hindustan Times* wondered if the development would help tighten the enforcement agencies’ noose around the likes of Maida Damodaran. “With state patronage gone, Damodaran and his likes can expect a fresh onslaught from the CBI; many skeletons can tumble out of the cupboard.” *The Hindu* lamented that Jagat Dhillon had, by his decision, helped the main Right-wing opposition party stand against a secular combination which the Freedom Party headed. “Prime Minister Dhillon may have been an unhappy man, but he ought to have considered the consequences of his decision more deeply. Unwittingly perhaps, he has placed a communal party currently in the opposition, in the pole position.”

The country’s leading Hindi daily, *Dainik Jagran*, commented that bad *karma* had finally caught up with the first family and its party. “It has been said in our sacred scriptures that you cannot escape the consequences of your deeds. Let’s hope that the new government that comes in will bear this in mind.”

Jagat Dhillon was asked by the President to continue in his post until a new regime took over, but he declined. President’s Rule was then imposed. He would vacate his sprawling official residence in the next few days and shift to a three-bedroom flat he had purchased on loan a decade ago. Meanwhile, the official process for fresh polls had already been set in motion. Two weeks thereon, the Election Commission of India would announce the dates for the general elections - a mammoth phenomenon in the world’s largest democracy.

Political analysts had already started to comment that the Freedom Party was not in great shape. Seniors like Fali blogged openly that the slew of scandals had cost the Freedom Party dearly and it would take an enormous miracle to save it now. One that didn’t seem anywhere around in the near future.

Policy paralysis had set in. The morale of ground-level workers was low. There was also the prospect of senior party leaders leaving. They had no qualms to go where the wind blew stronger. Dipika noted with concern that while the public response to the exit of the government had been welcoming, the blame for undermining the Prime Minister’s authority had been laid at her doorstep.

There were slim chances of the Freedom Party making a comeback. Besides its own internal weaknesses, it faced an external threat. The emergence of a new leader on the national canvas of the principal opposition, the People’s Voice, was more than a cause for concern. For over a decade, he had been serving as the Chief Minister of an industrialised state in the West of India and had proved his mettle as a capable leader and visionary politician. A string of achievements only added to his already growing popularity. His muscular brand of politics coupled with an unapologetically aggressive approach to national issues had endeared him to the public.

The People’s Voice too was on the lookout for a leader who could effectively exploit the Freedom Party’s misery. There were enough veterans in People’s Voice with far richer experience, but they no longer enthused the masses. Springing rapidly to action, People’s Voice declared the incumbent Chief Minister as its new prime ministerial candidate. There were some murmurs of dissent, with those loyal to the veteran leadership expressing concerns, but they were papered over. People’s Voice had felt the pulse of the people, and realised that the time to strike was now.

The year was 2014 and the People’s Voice party rose as one to present its prime ministerial candidate as a charismatic and bold contender. The Freedom Party had, on the other hand, no face to present. In the wake of the flak that surrounded the family post the Dhillon government’s resignation, it was only prudent to avoid projecting Gulab as its prime ministerial candidate. Dipika knew better than to do that.

Most analysts commented that the Freedom Party had lost the battle even before it had begun.

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## The Tables Turned

One of the last calls that Jagat made as Prime Minister was to Mike. “There will be some developments. However, I expect you to go ahead with your work as planned. Tell the CBI chief to continue with his work as well. Also, informally, meet the heads of the Central Vigilance Commission and the Comptroller and Auditor General and brief them on the new developments. They are already on the job, but it will help if you continue providing them with moral and material support.”

Mike knew what the Prime Minister had referred to. After his resignation and the dissolution of the House, everybody reported to the President, who had set up a committee of advisors to help him govern in the interim period before the elected government could take over. Now that the fetters were fully removed, the probe agencies stepped up their investigations. Both the CBI and the Enforcement Directorate zeroed in on Maida Damodaran and Dalda Dalvi. They no longer had Madam to hide behind.

The first to be called for questioning by the CBI was Dalda. He ignored the CBI summons initially, but relented thereafter, when the agency made it clear that they would move to declare him an absconder. He arrived at the CBI headquarters in New Delhi and was grilled for five hours. The interrogating officers had prepared an extensive questionnaire that covered his incense-stick manufacturing business and other illicit ventures. Dalda flatly denied involvement in drug trade, but when he was confronted with evidence, including statements of people who worked for him, he was flummoxed. The CBI had every little detail of his nefarious businesses. He tried to wriggle out claiming political vendetta. Four days later, he was summoned for another round of questioning. At the end of it, he was placed under arrest.

Dalda had a battery of lawyers to defend him. They were among the country’s best legal minds and members from the Freedom Party. Initially, they had argued for anticipatory bail before he was held. Later, they changed tack and sought to convince the judge on the futility of keeping him under arrest since he was cooperating with the agency. They said that he would surrender his passport in order to ensure that he did not leave the country. But the CBI held that Dalda had been giving vague answers to their queries and his release on bail could enable him to compromise the inquiry. He was still too influential. The court accepted the CBI’s plea.

Meanwhile, the CBI had also begun to investigate the LEPE affair, involving the Indian Revenue Service officer Deepak Masani. Deepak had already been questioned and the agency had collected significant information thereafter. He had agreed to turn approver. But the CBI was still in the process of connecting the dots in the affair, what with things spreading beyond India’s boundaries. They were in no hurry to question Maida; he was a wily politician and seasoned lawyer, perfectly capable of slipping through legal and procedural loopholes.

Various teams of the CBI and the Enforcement Directorate had stationed themselves in Kerala, furiously ploughing through information they had collected on the counterfeit currency racket and its links with the IPL, drug trade, terrorism and Love Jihad. Haji Pir Mohammad was under the lens along with several others. A one-time cycle-puncture repairer, a one-time electrician, both of whom had come to sudden wealth, had been picked up for interrogation. The line of inquiry had led to a bunch of chartered accountants involved in handling and distributing unaccounted money. Agency officials visited Jai Mangalam Jewels as well. They were baffled at the extent of the network. It was actually a network that contained many smaller networks, making it extremely difficult to trace the roots.

Maida was both pleased and rattled by the news of Dalda’s arrest. He was happy that Dalda, who was forever seeking to undermine his influence in the corridors of power, was behind bars. Even if he were to be released, he would be severely constrained in his activities. But Maida was also worried that it might be his turn next. Now that he was not in the government, he could no longer pull strings to sabotage the probe. He was already aware that the agencies were on his trail and so he began wiping off evidence and clearing tracks wherever he could. The LEPE machine auction case was problematic, though. Maida had no hold over the IRS officer whom he had deputed to the Amazon jungles. By now, Deepak Masani would have already opened his mouth, he thought. His only hope lay in the Freedom Party returning to power. This, though, was a size zero chance.

The People’s Voice had made the Freedom Party’s corruption their main political plank. There were other individuals and organisations that started coming to the fore as well. An 80-year-old Gandhian emerged as the rallying point for an anti-corruption movement primarily directed at the Freedom Party’s rule. The activist had begun to attract massive crowds at rallies and nearly every anti-Freedom Party leader or outfit had sought his blessings. While the movement was at its peak, Maida finally received summons from the CBI for questioning. Unlike Dalda, he barely resisted and submitted himself to interrogation at the agency’s headquarters.

When asked about the LEPE purchase, he denied any involvement. He also claimed innocence on all charges of money laundering as well. Instead, in the capacity of Finance Minister, he had asked his team to crack down on the counterfeit currency business.

Although the CBI could get nothing incriminating out of him, the fact that he had been questioned was fodder enough for the main opposition to raise the ante against the Freedom Party. It helped that its new prime ministerial candidate’s image was sparkling clean. As voting day drew closer, it became evident that the Freedom Party was set to lose. The only question was, how badly.

Exit polls suggested voters swinging in favour of the People’s Voice. But the election results created history. The Freedom Party had won less than 45 out of the 542 seats in the Lok Sabha, a matter of grave embarrassment for the oldest political party of India with a century-long history.

The People’s Voice on the other hand, that had started as a two-member representation in the parliament, changed the course of Indian polity by becoming the only single party to have secured a majority on its own, in the last thirty years. With its allies, the tally went up to 330. There were celebrations galore across the country amid the party’s vast cadre and supporters, even while the People’s Voice got down to work from day one.

Someone else who was as happy had nothing to with the People’s Voice in any way.

“Many congratulations, my friend! What could have been better than this!” said a jubilant Fali Mistry to former Prime Minister Jagat Dhillon.

The meek sardar’s gamble had paid off.

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## The arrival of Hasmukh Jadeja

Hasmukh Jadeja’s modest dreams had never extended beyond the obscure village in Gujarat that was his home for twenty years. His family was poor and landless and the day they had two full meals would be one to celebrate. His father toiled all day for the rich landowners in their village, while his mother worked as a housemaid. Hasmukh spent his initial childhood studying at a neighbouring village school that functioned when the teachers had time off from their farming duties. His parents strove to afford his schooling so that he could move to the town and make a better living after he grew up.

The boy was an average student but was adept at gathering children and creating *morchas*. On one occasion, he led a procession of little agitators to the headmaster and placed the demand for better toilet facilities in the school. He was caned for this. But it was an early reflection of the leadership he would exercise later in life.

On another occasion, when the district school inspector was to visit, he got together a bunch of students and petitioned the official against the errant teaching staff. The headmaster later summoned his father and gave a stern warning.

It was a government school and education was free. Besides, there was a midday meal that the school served. Hasmukh would later recall that that was the only meal he was sure to have in the day, six days a week. Beyond school hours, he had nothing much to do except frolic in the village pond or raid the mango orchards with his wayward friends.

By the time he was enrolled in a secondary school close by, the financial situation at home had worsened. His father was grossly overworked and therefore suffered from repeated ailments. His mother had to cut down on her household chores to tend to him. Secondary education was relatively expensive; Hasmukh had to invest in a uniform and textbooks too apart from the fee. At one point, it appeared that he would have to drop out and help his father.

One day, as Hasmukh was trudging along to go to school, he met Nilesh Shah, the village headman. Nilesh was well-off, having procured twenty acres of land. His elder son was a construction supervisor in Ahmedabad. The headman was acquainted with Hasmukh’s family’s problems. He was empathic but not the sort to give away money in charity.

Instead, he had a job for Hasmukh. He asked the boy to help him with maintaining his accounts, on a monthly pay of Rs.100. Hasmukh had seen the red ledger only from a distance and had no idea of what to do with it. But the prospect of earning a hundred bucks was enough to get him going immediately. In lesser time than Nilesh anticipated, Hasmukh mastered the skill of accounting. With his new earning, he was able to fund his education and contribute to the household expenses as well. He continued to work and study till he completed school.

On his way home one day, the weekly congregation in the village playground piqued his interest. There were more than a 100 people listening to someone he did not recognise. Often, Hasmukh would linger at the periphery of the playground and watch the proceedings. He would hear them sing *Vande* *Mataram*, recite slogans that revolutionaries like Chandrashekhar Azad and Bhagat Singh used to raise. He would listen to the main speaker talk of someone named Swami Vivekananda who had popularised the Hindu way of life and the country’s cultural heritage across the world. Towards the end, everyone would chant in unison: *Bharat mata ki jai*. It ignited a passion for patriotism in him just like it did with the others attending the talk.

One day, he approached the leader and introduced himself.

“*Saheb*, can I join this group?” he said, adding with as much power and passion he could put in his voice, “*Bharat Mata ki jai*!”

“How old are you?” the leader said with a warm smile.

“Fourteen.”

“Alright son. But on the condition that you will focus on your studies as well.”

Hasmukh was elated and touched the leader’s feet. It would be a turning point in Hasmukh’s life.

The issue of higher education was a challenge soon enough. He did not have the means to go to college because he would have to settle in the nearby town. Nilesh Shah came to his rescue once again. He got Hasmukh admitted in a distance learning programme for a graduation degree. Hasmukh now had his studies, his apprenticeship with Nilesh and his participation in the weekly gatherings at the village playground.

The flexibility of the distance education programme left him with a lot of time for the activities of the organisation he had joined. It was called Bharat Nirman Sangh (BNS). Within a year of joining, he had been made the chief campaigner at the block level. He was to learn that a political party, People’s Voice, was an affiliate of the BNS. Over the next few years, Hasmukh had risen through the ranks of the voluntary outfit and was made the national general secretary. He earned his graduation degree as well, around the same time.

As one of the half dozen national general secretaries, he had the opportunity to meet with several senior leaders of the People’s Voice. There were constant interactions between leaders and workers of the two organisations. The People’s Voice, although the chief opposition at the centre, was in power in only a few states of the country, and Gujarat was one of them. Unfortunately, since it could not effectively manage the aftermath of the massive floods that hit the state, the Gujarat government fell into crisis.

There was huge public outcry and the party’s national leadership realised that they would lose Gujarat if they did not bring someone dynamic in charge. This was easier said than done because the state unit was in shambles, having been split into various factions. An ‘outsider’ to the state’s politics could just save the day. Hasmukh was summoned by the senior leaders of the party. They had an important task for him. He was stunned by what he heard. He had never before stepped inside the state secretariat. His protests were brushed aside, and the preparations began.

“*Ba, maari navi nokri laagi gayi, vidhaan sabha ma.* (I’ve got a new job, at the state secretariat),” he went home and told his mother. When she asked him what this job was, Hasmukh touched her feet and said, “*Gujarat na mukhya mantri ni nokri!* (The job of Gujarat’s Chief Minister!)”

Unfortunately, his father wasn’t alive to see Hasmukh being sworn in. It was a modest ceremony with a grand promise for Gujarat’s future. Chief Minister Hasmukh Jadeja was counted among the country’s youngest chief ministers.

Barely four months into the job, Hasmukh faced his first serious crisis. An incident of massive communal violence had broken out in Ahmedabad, originating in the old city and spreading everywhere. Hasmukh was new to politics with hardly any experience in these matters. The police force behaved like it ruled the state. But he acted swiftly, asking the centre for military assistance and cracking the whip on the police. Within three days, the situation normalised, but over a hundred people were killed by then.

His critics within the party and outside seized upon the opportunity and demanded his resignation. He refused and called for an election instead. He led the party to a big victory, thus establishing himself as Gujarat’s undisputed leader. He reshuffled the administration and the police force, bringing in people with the right credentials and good track records of performance. He warned his officials of grave consequences if another communal incident were to occur.

From there on, Chief Minister Jadeja directed his focus towards Gujarat’s all-round development. In what came to be called the Hasmukh Model, he rewrote the growth narrative of the state. Soon his name came to be recognised across the country as a super performing Chief Minister and he became the point of attention whenever he was in Delhi on official engagements.

Ten years into the job, and with two back-to-back electoral wins in Gujarat, Hasmukh had begun to emerge as a nationally recognised leader. Yet his party, the People’s Voice, was stagnating at the national level. With general elections a mere eighteen months away, the party needed a fresh burst of energy.

A few middle-level leaders, who had been consistently groomed by the senior leadership, made a bold move and floated Hasmukh’s name as the prime ministerial candidate, amidst opposition from veterans and their supporters. The feedback from the masses was too loud in Hasmukh’s favour to ignore. The die was thus cast.

Hasmukh’s strengths as a powerful orator, a man of the masses and a strong leader untouched by corruption were systematically projected. These qualities stood out even more starkly in contrast with the image of the Freedom party’s top leadership. Disgusted with the state of affairs of the past years and eager for change, the people voted massively for the People’s Voice. There was no doubt that every vote was earned in Hasmukh Jadeja’s name. The entire election campaign turned out in the American presidential style, with the focus settling on one man and his potential. No other campaign in India’s election history had made one candidate into this kind of a rock star.

After a grand oath-taking ceremony, which was attended by leaders of various neighbouring countries as well, Prime Minister Jadeja got down to business immediately. As a consummate politician, he knew that public mood takes no time to shift. Having won the election on the plank of fighting corruption, the first decision his government took was to set up a Special Investigation Team (SIT) to tackle the black money menace. The second was to expedite the ongoing probes into counterfeit currency, drug trade and terror funding. Anybody found guilty, no matter how high up on the ladder, would be taken to task.

Alarm bells began to ring elsewhere. The battle lines were clearly drawn, after all. With Hasmukh Jadeja assuming power at the centre, regional parties, politicians, bureaucrats had to decide whose side they were on.

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## A New Era of Indian Politics Begins

The Freedom Party’s comprehensive loss in the elections had as much to do with Hasmukh Jadeja’s magnetic personality, as it was about his colleague and close friend Kapil Pandya’s organisational acumen. Kapil had taken over as president of People’s Voice just before the polls and was entrusted with the task of creating a mechanism by which the huge goodwill that Hasmukh enjoyed translated into votes. This meant a micro-management of booths across the country, among other things. Kapil launched a massive membership drive for the party, conducted workshops for booth-level workers in all parts of the country, and motivated everyone to work in a way that would ensure that every single person who supported the party turned out to cast their vote.

He put in a great deal of effort along with senior party leaders, coming up with unconventional choices and strategies. Both Kapil and Hasmukh had realised that it was now or never; the Freedom Party’s image was at its lowest ever and now was the best time to strike. And strike hard.

Kapil was a genius in his own right. He had the reputation of being a no-nonsense leader, and his clarity of thought was matched by his decisive actions. He had demonstrated these abilities as a state minister in Gujarat during Hasmukh’s chief ministership. In one of the many huddles they had, the two decided that their focus should be especially on Uttar Pradesh, the state that sent the highest number of MPs to the Lok Sabha. It was also a state where the People’s Voice had been stagnating for years.

Over many years of dormancy, the local leadership of the party in Uttar Pradesh had all but vanished, though it still had a percentage of loyal followers among the voters. The rise of regional parties that played the communal and caste-based cards to lure voters had not just eaten into the People’s Voice vote share but also that of the Freedom Party’s. Eventually, the presence of the Freedom Party was rendered irrelevant in a state that was once considered the party’s bastion. Kapil concluded that the regional parties could be stymied if he could not just sell the Hasmukh dream effectively but also cause a dent in the caste-based equations of these parties.

Stationing himself in Uttar Pradesh, Kapil worked on relentlessly and came out with one winning formula after another, including pitching the prime ministerial candidate to contest from an Uttar Pradesh seat. It proved to be a masterstroke.

Besides Uttar Pradesh, Kapil took keen interest in the neighbouring state of Bihar, where the party was contesting the elections in alliance with other parties, except one of the main regional parties, which had until recently been a critical partner. That party had parted ways after People’s Voice had declared Hasmukh as its prime ministerial candidate.

The results from both Uttar Pradesh and Bihar were astoundingly in favour of the People’s Voice with the voters choosing to place their trust in Hasmukh Jadeja’s leadership rather than caste-based politics. The two states thus prepared the ground for the party’s stunning triumph across the country.

With an absolute majority, Hasmukh had the leeway to pick members of his cabinet as well as direct the future of the party. There were no compulsions from coalition partners that he had to deal with, although the party decided to form the government with its pre-poll allies.

The media and the people could only speculate, while Hasmukh and Kapil had the most unconventional choices on their lists for the cabinet as well. This had made it difficult for the media, and for the Lutyens cabal to know whether or not their interests would be protected. Both Hasmukh and Kapil were the ultimate outsiders who were determined to rock this lobby’s boat.

But while the duo was secretive, the person they used as an interface with the media and the various cabals, was not. Prafulla Prakash, was an ultimate Delhi insider, having been a public figure in Delhi for several years. When he set up practice as a lawyer, PP (initials that he hated to be called by) quickly found out that there were two ways to win cases — one to work hard, dig out the facts and run bare-knuckled battles, and the other, to manipulate the system using bribes or honey traps. He did fall back on the unscrupulous means sometimes in combination with his seasoned skills. He was sharp, knowledgeable, well-informed and held admirable legal acumen.

Prakash had shared a long association with Hasmukh and offered legal advice on various occasions during Hasmukh’s chief ministership. In course of time, the two drew close and even became friends. Later on, PP was among the first leaders of People’s Voice to suggest and vehemently back Hasmukh’s name as the prime ministerial candidate. It was only natural that once the ‘outsider’ Hasmukh became Prime Minister, PP would once again be his legal guide. It only helped to be closely associated with Kapil as well, whom he had helped with invaluable advice too.

Nothing seemed odd when Hasmukh gave PP a major say in the selection of ministerial candidates. PP made full use of this trust, eventually securing two important ministries — Finance and Defence — for himself. It was an untenable arrangement, and PP was ‘persuaded’ to give up Defence.

The new Defence Minister had the reputation of being both squeaky clean and decisive. He sprung to action with his assignment at the centre, immediately. Until then, he was content being the Chief Minister of his home state, Goa.

Efficient with his work from the beginning, he began to uncover a number of inconsistencies in defence purchases from the tenure of the Freedom Party. He short-listed dubious deals and clamped down on corrupt officials involved in arms procurements. A number of influential people got rubbed the wrong way, taking their sob stories to the one person who listened to them with sympathy — Prafulla Prakash. PP was the ultimate networker and his politics for years had centred on the motto of ‘Live and let live.’ The ‘victims’ were confident that with his influence over the Prime Minister, they could be bailed out.

But PP had other problems brewing in his own backyard that needed to be addressed. Prime Minister Jadeja had ordered a clampdown on the access that various lobbyists (this also included sections of the media) had to critical departments of the government, more particularly those related to defence, finance, commerce and environment. These were the areas of PP’s influence despite being out of office. He had been representing a number of industrial groups and activists for a while now. His influence was intact even during the previous government’s regime. Now that he was a cabinet minister himself, it was weird that he couldn’t get his ‘friends’ access.

In the good old days, the lobby had not just access to the government’s decision-making process but could also influence important decisions and legislations. All those privileges had gone flying out of the window with Prime Minister Jadeja’s arrival. PP was deeply impacted but he couldn’t do much besides pouring his anguish into a secret diary. He also began to secretly devise ways to bring pressure upon Hasmukh while keeping himself out of the picture.

Negative stories began appearing in a section of the media controlled by a particular industrialist, who had lost access to the corridors of power in the changed political environment. These news reports were unsparingly critical of the Prime Minister and his lieutenant Kapil Pandya. Most of that material was pure fiction but that didn’t matter since the idea was to throw muck and run.

The social media, however, took up the challenge and effectively began countering the falsehoods. All the same, the mainstream media’s narrative did have the desirable impact, since the Prime Minister turned to PP for guidance. PP extracted his pound of flesh, advising Hasmukh on a range of issues with hidden personal agendas. This advice was taken in full faith and turned out disastrous for the party. It lost mandate across a bunch of states in the assembly elections that followed. The People’s Voice was suddenly on the back foot, which was a complete reversal of its fortune from just a few months ago. The Freedom Party didn’t miss the opportunity to pounce on the Prime Minister and his team in parliament and outside. They had a field day exploiting the falsehoods that were spread about both Hasmukh and Kapil.

The opposition, led by the Freedom Party, began to rake up stray incidents of violence against members of the minority community, presenting them as part of a devious plan by the ruling dispensation to abuse the minorities. The vandalization of churches by miscreants was projected as an attack on the Christian community, and the lynching of some suspected cattle-smugglers was touted to be anti-Muslim. The orchestrated campaign was picked up by sections of the international media, which lost no time in demonising the Jadeja government and branding it anti-minority.

However, PP remained influential. He got his way in the appointment of a new Governor to the Reserve Bank of India in place of the incumbent one who had refused to toe his line. There were murmurs that the new appointee was close to the former Finance Minister, Maida Damodaran, and also a confidant of PP. This was not surprising, because PP had not only retained but also promoted a number of bureaucrats in the Finance Ministry, who were close to officials from the earlier government. He also continued to exert influence in other ways. For instance, when Prime Minister Jadeja’s ministry was expanded, he managed to take on board a number of his protégés.

If the Prime Minister was aware of PP’s shenanigans, he did not disclose them. But in his own way, he worked to downsize his influential minister, by bringing in his trusted associates in key positions. One such appointment was that of a retired Indian Police Service official as the National Security Advisor (NSA). Amarnath Verma had had a distinguished service track record and was considered one of the best sleuths the country had produced. He had conducted several daring operations, often crossing enemy lines to obtain critical information. Hasmukh had the knack to recognise potential in people and promptly took him on board as the NSA.

Amarnath also brought about a paradigm shift in the country’s security narrative. For the first time since the war of 1971, Indian forces not only crossed the Line of Control into Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, but also targeted terror camps deep inside Pakistan. The troika of the Prime Minister, the party chief and the NSA had effectively taken over key policymaking, leaving PP pretty much out of the equation.

Behind the closed doors of the Prime Minister’s office, his close-knit team worked with him to also lay the foundation for another path-breaking move — the revocation of the seven-decade old Article 370 that had provided Jammu and Kashmir special status and which was responsible for its alienation from the rest of the country. Another new narrative was crafted: The government of India would henceforth discuss with Pakistan only the issue of Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, which needed to be integrated into the Indian Union. There would be no more discussions on Jammu and Kashmir as it was an integral part of India like the other states. And that was final.

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## The Demonetisation Sledgehammer

Prime Minister Jadeja was turning out to be the sort to deliver surprise after unguessable surprise with his governance so far. But this one was nothing short of a shocker for everyone – the cabinet, the opposition, the media, the people. In a television address to the nation one evening, the Prime Minister announced that all Rs.500 and Rs.1000 notes, from the stroke of midnight that day, would become demonetised. The idea was to deliver a body blow to the proliferating black money economy in the country. The impact was like an earthquake reverberating through trade, commerce, the stock market (that nosedived like never before), banking, foreign investment – the list was long.

A couple of days later, Chennakesavan Krishnan (aka CK) was sitting on the edge of his chair. CK had encountered many challenges in his life, but this was unique. The Prime Minister had summoned him to South Block to craft a strategy on effectively implementing demonetisation. CK was among the very few whom the Prime Minister had spoken to about the demonetisation move.

Even the President of India had not been informed, let alone the cabinet of ministers. PP felt especially let down. As Finance Minister and one of the Prime Minister’s closest associates, he had expected to be taken into confidence. This was another indication that he was being side-lined. He had secretly become a subject of ridicule, with his friend and former Finance Minister, Maida, taunting him at being kept in the dark. Maida would not miss an opportunity to take a dig at PP to also provoke him to respond in a way that would embarrass the Prime Minister. But PP was a seasoned player and refused to take the bait. Instead, he quickly settled into the task of implementing the decision — something that Hasmukh expected him to do. This way, at least, he could still be seen as someone in the inner circle.

The problem was that he was offering reasons why demonetisation could not be implemented effectively while the Prime Minister was looking for solutions to his radical move. CK was not an admirer of the Finance Minister. He openly expressed disappointment over the not so effective measures of the finance ministry to revive the economy left in shambles by the previous regime. CK believed, given the huge mandate the Prime Minister had received, his government ought to take dramatic and transformational steps. In private, Hasmukh agreed with him, but could not bring himself to tick off his Finance Minister who had stood by him in troubled times.

CK’s involvement had (expectedly) not gone down well with PP. But there was little he could do except to grin and bear. PP was determined to place as many obstacles as he could in CK’s way, if only to discredit his efforts. It was the only thing he could do. But he was determined to do it.

CK was a chartered accountant by training with an eye for seeing the magic in numbers and reading between the lines of financial documents. He was now pushing seventy, but even in his twenties, he was advising people in high-profile positions on financial matters. He combined the qualities of a financial wizard and a perceptive lawyer with argumentative skills. Over the decades, CK came to be respected immensely for his knowledge on politico-economic matters. He was paid handsomely for his effort too. But he could also hold forth intelligently on civilizational-cultural issues, embarking with ease on India’s glorious past, its ancient texts etc. As if all this was not enough, he was a journalist too, editing a well-circulated regional language weekly known for its straightforward attacks and satirical wit. Besides, he wrote regularly on current affairs for various prestigious dailies. This combination of knowledge, clarity and insight had drawn Hasmukh to him, who never failed to recognise someone who placed the nation above all else.

CK was an admirer of Hasmukh too, right since Hasmukh was Gujarat’s Chief Minister. There was buzz that CK would be contesting as a candidate of People’s Voice from a constituency in southern India. But he immediately snuffed all speculation, pointing out (with wry humour) that he was too outspoken to fit in. After Hasmukh became the Prime Minister, he offered CK a berth in the cabinet and assured him that he would be made a member of the Rajya Sabha. CK politely declined the offer but told the Prime Minister that he would be available for any other service that he could offer. And now, his expertise and experience were called upon to prepare a roadmap for the successful implementation of demonetisation.

He was also among the very small number of people who knew that Hasmukh’s real objective behind demonetisation was to flush out counterfeit currency and strike at the biggies who had enjoyed protection under the Freedom Party’s rule. It suited CK fine, because he had been a trenchant critic of the former Finance Minister, who, he was convinced, was involved too. CK had also collected voluminous material on Maida’s other deals, including illegal clearances from the Foreign Investment Promotion Board and his role in the spectrum scam. He was waiting for more skeletons to tumble out. His only reservation was that the current Finance Minister, PP, appeared less than keen to put his old friends in the dock.

Meanwhile, the Intelligence Bureau led by Mike had begun to brief the Prime Minister on everything to do with the counterfeit currency menace. FCIN entered India through cooperative banks, post offices situated along the borders, IPL betting-and-spot fixing payoff money, and through Nepal and Bangladesh along the porous borders. Over a series of such briefings, Mike was amazed by the Prime Minister’s ability to swiftly grasp the essentials and act as rapidly on the best course of action.

An important decision was to suspend the licences of certain cooperative banks that were suspected to harbour counterfeit currency. Among them were banks in Kerala that the bicycle puncture repairer Imtiaz and the electrician Jabbar had accounts in. The Reserve Bank of India worked overtime to shortlist such banks. Besides the suspension of licences, they were also notified that they could not convert the existing cash in their vaults into new notes. Owners and patrons of these banks - mostly politicians - rose in protest, accusing the government of political interference in the affairs of independent banks. They claimed that the government wanted to arm-twist them because they happened to be speaking out against its “communal” agenda. They ensured the mainstream media picked up this narrative as well. The media happily did this, without bothering to dig deeper into facts.

At the same time, politicians who had a stake in running FICN rackets, had begun to resort to novel means to wriggle out. One ‘creative’ female politician struck a deal with a Nepalese minister who promised to deposit her money in certain banks of Nepal for a 10% cut. The Intelligence Bureau got wind of this and informed the Prime Minister as well as the Home Minister. Hasmukh promptly contacted the Defence Minister and the two worked out a plan to prevent her from carrying out her covert deal. It was announced that the Indian Army would be conducting a routine exercise along the India-Nepal borders for three days and so no movement of goods across the borders was allowed. New Delhi informed the Nepalese government before the announcement.

The lady was in a fix. The money she had was in cash and could not possibly be transferred online. She lashed out at the Prime Minister, using personal slight as well, and claimed that the Jadeja government was set to destroy the age-old ties between India and Nepal. She received support for her campaign from certain elitist Nepalese politicians who were forever seeing conspiracies on India’s part to “subjugate” Nepal.

Prime Minister Jadeja and his government remained unperturbed and came down on many such elements without making a big hue and cry about it in the media.

In the meanwhile, despite CK’s best efforts, the demonetisation drive was moving forward in less than effective ways. Banks did not have enough time to weed out the counterfeit notes. When the dust settled and the Reserve Bank of India started counting the high-value currency notes that had become worthless pieces of paper, it realised that at least 13% of the counterfeit currency had made it back into the system.

The opposition began to question the government, pointing out that the aim of flushing out black money had not been realised. Besides, the Prime Minister’s rivals accused him of putting ordinary citizens to great inconvenience by his “ill-considered decision.” For two months, long queues could be seen outside banks with people waiting to deposit the high-value notes they had. Most of them were ordinary citizens with hard-earned clean money. Across the country, people faced major cash crunches, and everything was impacted; daily business transactions, weddings, life as India knew it.

One person who was secretly pleased by all of this was PP. He made it known through his friends in the media that the person behind the fiasco was CK, who had not advised the Prime Minister properly.

A nation used to making payments by cash was suddenly using digital payment methods for groceries, milk, pills and even auto rickshaw fare. The real estate sector, which was one of the major sources of black money, was practically tumbled upside down. Regardless, the implementation of demonetisation at the ground level was pretty dismal.

Besides, the new notes circulated were of different dimensions, which meant that all Automated Teller Machines (ATMs) had to be re-calibrated. The dimensions had to be changed to deter counterfeiting of the new notes too. It proved to be a hugely time-consuming process, and often people returned empty handed from the ATMs. The net result turned out to be that demonetisation was a huge inconvenience with the general public and the government seemed to have made a mess.

Realising that much more had to be done to tackle the fake currency menace, the NSA asked Mike to hit at the FICN network with new vigour. It was brought to the government’s notice that India was getting its currency printing paper from the same source that Pakistan was. The Home Minister moved swiftly and brought about a halt to the purchase from the vendor concerned. It happened to be the same vendor who was patronized by the previous Finance Minister and the company that he had created, headed by his trusted bureaucrats, despite knowing that the vendor had links with Pakistan.

A seemingly different development, but actually connected to the FICN racket, came to the government’s attention. The Intelligence Bureau and the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW - the country’s external intelligence agency) unearthed a plot by some Islamist groups to bomb churches along the coast of a neighbouring country. Parts of the ammunition had been assembled in India and smuggled across to the target nation.

New Delhi promptly shared the information with Sri Lanka, and the United States was kept in the loop as well. Unfortunately, the island nation failed to act on time. The bombings did happen and over 300 people were killed. It was a huge wakeup call for the government there to finally crack down on Islamist organisations on its soil. But it was all too little, too late.

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## An impending disaster

The terror attacks in neighbouring Sri Lanka had rattled India’s intelligence establishment. The new NSA had to speed up his efforts. His decades-long experience told him that terrorists had to be successful just once while the agencies had to be on alert all the time.

With India, terrorists had been successful many more times and their audacity grew with every attack that they successfully perpetrated. Over the years, especially during the Freedom Party’s rule, there had been several violations across the Line of Control, resulting in the loss of a great number of security personnel and innocent civilians. New Delhi could have toughened its stand considerably after the 26/11 attacks and with the international community in India’s favour, but the Dhillon regime had developed cold feet. Terrorists and the country that patronised them were now confident that they could strike at will.

The new government had promised a more muscular and decisive approach to terror, and now it was under pressure to keep up the promise. With the media reporting that the terror attack in Sri Lanka had connections traced to India, it became imperative for the security agencies to act. The NSA summoned the chiefs of the IB and RAW for an urgent meeting. He also invited CK. The multi-talented chartered accountant and policy expert was also known for his sharp insights into the functioning of terror groups, especially their links to the counterfeit currency networks.

Amarnath had a chunk of new information to share. He told the three gentlemen gathered in his secure office study that the people who had assembled some of the bombs used in Sri Lanka, were plotting similar attacks within India, and their handlers were sitting across the Line of Control (LoC). He played for them an audio recording in which a handler was heard directing one Rizwan Sheikh based in Mumbai to hasten the execution of attacks in the country. “Inshallah, we shall give a befitting reply to this Hindu nationalist government of Jadeja. God has called upon us to give justice to our Muslim brethren living under the *kafir’s* rule.” The intelligence chiefs were taken aback but hardly surprised that the NSA had laid his hands on this audio tape. The man was resourceful and had his people in nearly every part of the globe’s troubled spots.

Such militant operations were generally funded by Pakistan, but now there was a new twist. It appeared that money was being raised from within India, and this is where CK’s expertise would be needed. Amarnath noted that the intelligence agencies had already gathered information of dozens of ordinary citizens, largely from Kerala, who had suddenly turned millionaires. They had contributed generously to a number of organisations registered as charitable bodies. The list of these trusts was on the NSA’s table. Mysteriously, the trusts had barely utilised the large corps of funds lying with them, despite being actively working in a variety of areas including education, health and environment. The question then was, what was this huge volume of money, running into several hundreds of crores, used for?

Further investigations had revealed deeper information of the actual ownership of these trusts, with a number of disturbing details emerging thereafter. Many of them had surreptitious links with underground organisations. Their telephone conversations, tapped by the intelligence, showed they were in constant contact with dubious people based in Karachi, Islamabad and Dubai. The NSA had come to conclude that the money deposited in the charity trusts was to fund terror activities in the country. Now, this was the trouble. On the face of it, all transfers to the trusts appeared genuine, with the funds used sporadically but used nevertheless, to avoid suspicion. It would need a good amount of digging to get to the real bottom.

A common joke with Indian probe agencies was that India was like a large herbivorous dinosaur, which only stirred when provoked and walked when it should be running. It had learned to be content with only reacting to events, and even then, it would flatter to deceive. “We lack the killer instinct,” was a common phrase among these circles.

Occasionally India did act tough but backed off when matters came to the crunch. Often, it buckled under pressure from friendly countries that advised restraint — talk that they did not walk when they were attacked. Amarnath Verma was determined to change this depressing narrative. He often sought Israel’s example of how the small nation surrounded by hostile neighbours had shown immense courage in countering any threat to its borders. No amount of international pressure worked on past Israeli governments to protect its security and sovereignty. Its intelligence agency, Mossad, holds the reputation of doggedly tracing enemies and effectively eliminating them. Sometimes on foreign soil as well.

“What could be the possible targets?” CK said.

“We need more actionable information to know for sure,” Amarnath said.

“Could be anything from the Haji Ali shrine and the Siddhivinayak temple in Mumbai to the Born Jesus Basilica in Goa. Places of worship are a favourite,” Mike said.

“Or places with movement of large crowds of people such as the Delhi Metro or other railways stations. It could be the Bombay Stock Exchange or the IT hubs in Bengaluru and Hyderabad,” CK added.

“Of course. But one thing’s for sure. Something big is being planned for India and we have to pre-empt it,” Amarnath said.

Intelligence agencies had been monitoring chatter across various terror networks and picked up names of the usual targets mentioned. Security could and would be strengthened in all possible spots, but it was very likely that they were red herrings. After all, even the terrorists knew that they were being heard and quite possibly dropping the wrong names to divert attention from their real targets.

The NSA suggested that something even more sinister could be brewing. The Prime Minister and a few senior leaders of the ruling party were on the hit list. So far, no terror group had dared to target them. How long would it be before they got more audacious?

Islamist organisations across the world sat up and took notice of Prime Minister Jadeja’s growing popularity following his bold moves in the recent past. They seemed unsettled by the positive response he had received from Islamic countries in West Asia, some of whom had announced their highest civilian awards to honour him with. Countries like Iran and Saudi Arabia, at loggerheads with each other, gave Prime Minister Jadeja the red-carpet welcome. India’s strengthening relations with the US and Europe was an added trouble for the terror makers, according to experts. And then there was the India-Israel bonhomie, which caused further anguish.

The NSA concluded the meeting, asking the intelligence chiefs to step up their intel gathering efforts. An attack on the Prime Minister or senior political leaders was very likely. It really was time to think two steps ahead of the terrorists.

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## A Deadly Poison and a Deadlier Plan

Priya Menon was an early riser and trained hard at the gym for an hour every day. The call had come when she was busy kickboxing.

A 2008 batch intrepid IPS officer, she had served in sensitive areas and headed quite a few police stations, where she promptly ruffled feathers with the powerful lot. She had once dragged a local influential politician by the collar all the way to the police station when he refused to come over. On another occasion, she arrested an industrialist following a complaint of sexual assault by his maid.

But perhaps the most celebrated incident she was known for involved a muscleman-politician, who kept AK-47 rifles at home and roamed the streets on a horse, whipping people in his way. After cases were registered against him, he brazenly challenged her to arrest him. She took it to heart and launched a massive manhunt for the accused who had gone underground, eventually closing in on him. Realising that there was no escape, the man fled to Delhi and surrendered himself before the police there. Within 20 hours, Priya got him from Delhi back to Patna and dumped him behind bars.

Not surprisingly, she had received several ‘warning’ calls from ministers in the state government for her exploits that they were unhappy about. Dabang Devi – as she was called by many – bashed on regardless.

They could threaten her but could not get in her way because she was too brilliant to be put down. All they could do was to get her shunted from one police jurisdiction to another. Priya took these transfers as a validation of her doing the job well. No posting was a punishment; there was always something to be set right wherever she went. She was also gifted with the knack of getting to the root of the issue even in cases that seemed above board. She would persevere till the case was solved. Anybody who came in the way of her investigations in the meanwhile, got a taste of her wrath and unshakeable determination.

Impressed by these qualities, Amarnath recommended her name to the Intelligence Bureau. Priya had done enough conventional policing, and the NSA reasoned that her talent would be better utilised for matters of graver national importance. He was of the opinion that the Intelligence Bureau needed many more smart and courageous people to tackle the dangerous FICN-terror-betting-racket-Love-Jihad nexus.

It was the IB chief himself on the line. Priya jumped at the offer. Besides a good leap up on her career, it sounded like exciting work. She loved new challenges, after all.

However, she was not too pleased to know that she would be part of a team led by Karan Dixit, her batchmate at the IPS. Since she was his equal in terms of seniority, she saw no reason why she should be reporting to him.

The IB Director, Mike, was quick to notice the undercurrents of friction between them. Among his many strengths was a talent for man management. He had led several teams comprising some of the country’s finest minds, with equally big egos. He had shrewdly drawn the best out of them despite their interpersonal issues. He often steered their attention back to the larger picture and acknowledged each as a star in their own right.

He chatted up with Priya one day over coffee and gradually the conversation veered towards Karan. “He has more experience than you do in the organisation, Priya.”

“But Sir-”

“Karan’s success depends on how well you can support him. He is brilliant, Priya. Apart from a knack for drawing out the most difficult intel, his knowledge of Urdu, Persian and Arabic is a big asset to operate in countries that sponsor terrorism. But he would need your expertise in tracing the roots.”

She seemed to soften a bit.

“The country is bigger than all of us, individually and jointly,” Mike said finally. And like in most cases, that did the trick.

In their next meeting, Mike stressed on the importance of her role in the operation. He sketched out how counterfeit money becomes legitimate in India through shell companies, asking Karan to explain this further.

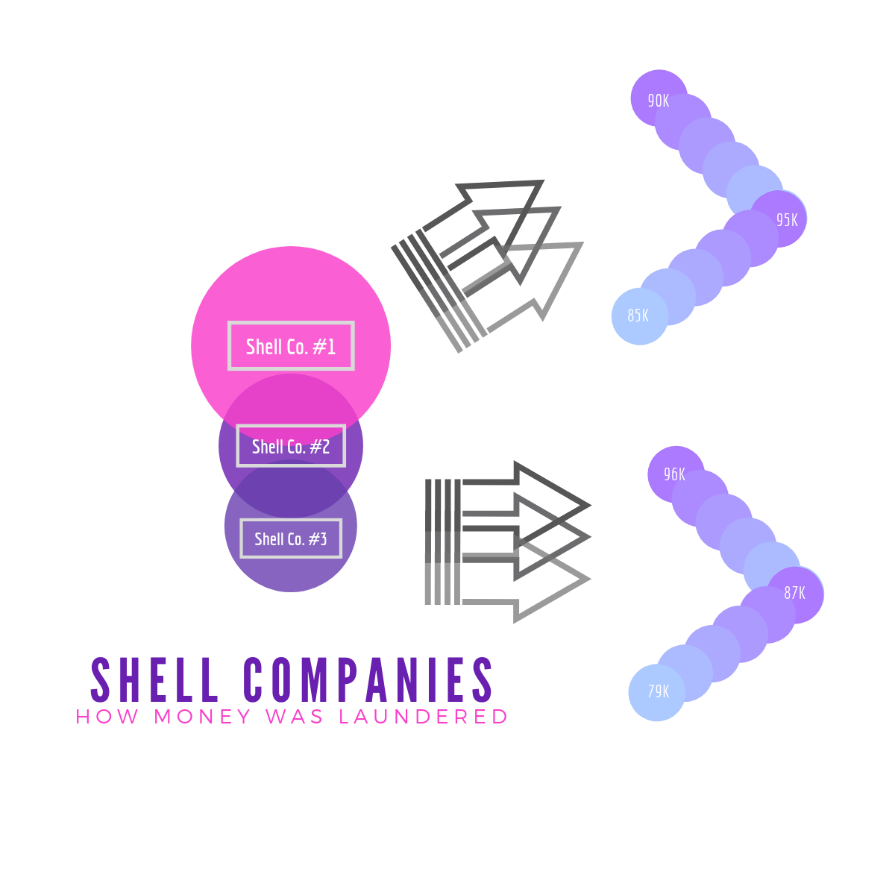


Figure 2. How shell companies layer the money

Karan explained how money is layered to individuals in amounts that are just under the scanner. For instance, the government had passed a law that required Tax Deduction at Source (TDS) for amounts of Rs.1 lakh and more before transfer to the intended recipient. If transfers were below this threshold, they needed no tax. There were several small transactions done below the tax-attracting limit for genuine sounding reasons - children’s education, donation for a friend’s medical expenses and so on.

The individuals would draw the money from their bank accounts. “Details of the recipients would be given to a hawala agent, who would contact the recipients to collect the money that they drew from their accounts,” Karan continued, as he illustrated on the board. “The hawala agent for the region would thus get back all the money disbursed.”

Recipients knew better than to spend the money. Anybody who tried to, could have an arm or leg chopped off; a strong message for the others. The collections would normally take place in a mosque, usually before or after prayers. It was difficult for either the police or any other agency to enter the mosque, leave alone conduct operations, since such a thing would turn politically sensitive. Once all the money was collected, the agent notified his handler abroad, either in Dubai, Karachi or even Islamabad.

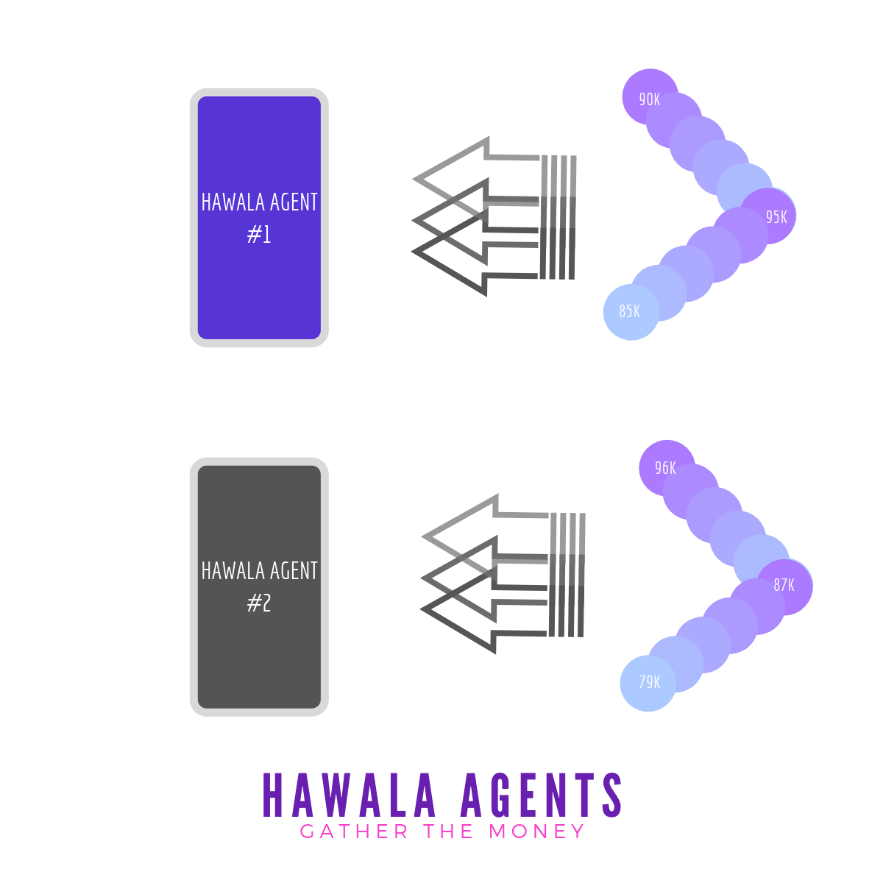


Figure 3. The integration step

Karan then drew another diagram as Priya looked on fascinated. This was new territory for her, and she began to reluctantly admire him for how articulate he was on a complex subject. He explained that the communication that transpires between India and Dubai is encrypted and almost impossible to decipher without the help of specialised software. The handler in Dubai would then transfer an equal amount in some standard currency such as the US dollar or the Euro or pound, into a shell company based in Dubai. The shell company then uses the money to buy equipment and ship it to India. Or the money is directed through a Mauritius-based shell firm to trade in India’s stock exchange and drive up stock prices, thus making handsome profits.

“The cycle of counterfeiting to legit is complete,” Karan said with a flourish, drawing a fourth figure. “Once this is accomplished, in the eyes of the law, even a Dawood Ibrahim is a legitimate investor. They could keep doing it while all that the agencies could do was watch,” Karan said, concluding.

Mike turned to Priya and said, “Here is a chance for you to help break this cycle. We know for a fact that there are other ways in which these shell companies are spending money. I see several new companies spring up in remote corners, with legitimate-sounding names, but when we look under the hood, the worms show up. For instance, Seed Research Labs Limited. Could you investigate what exactly it is that they research on?”

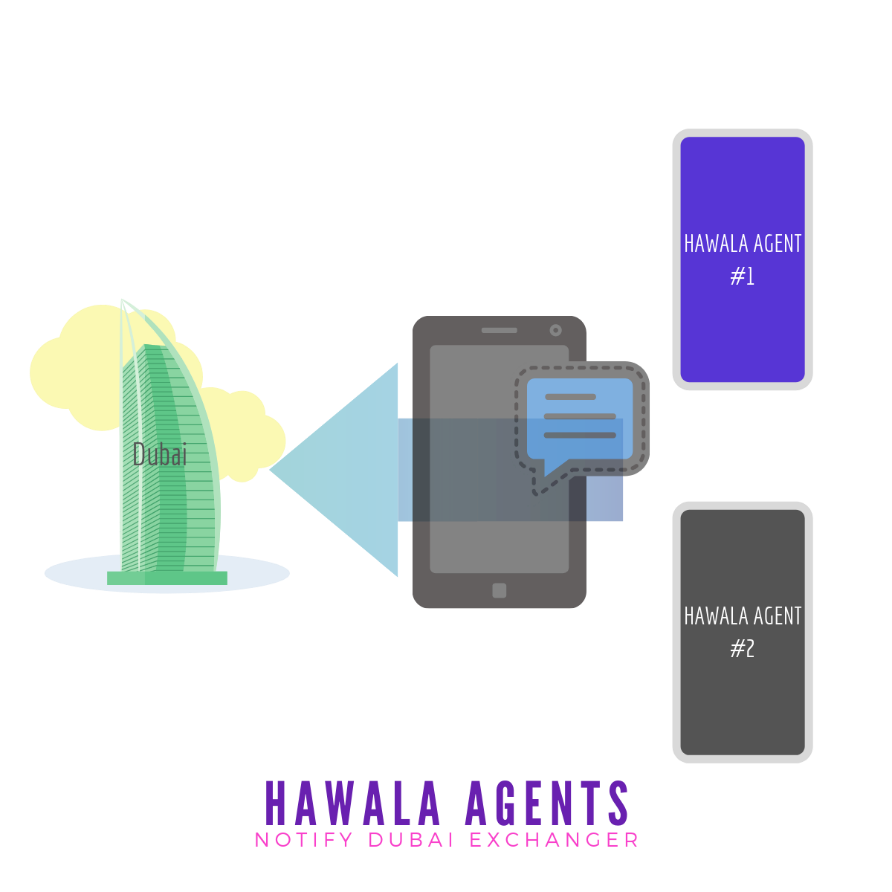


Figure 4. Legitimising the money

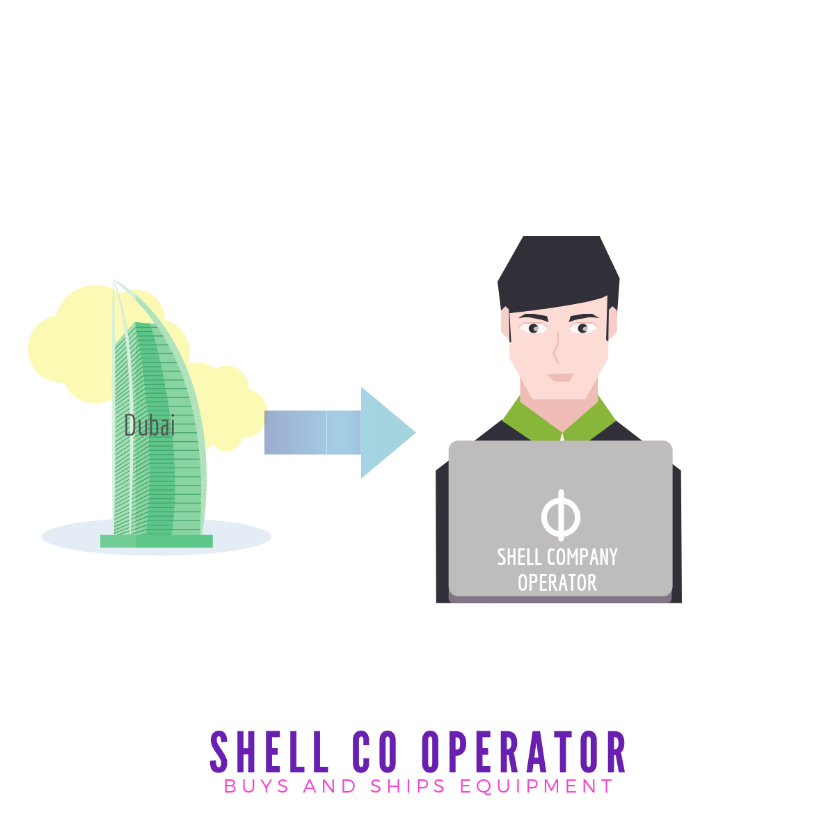


Figure 5. Cycle is complete

Priya pored over the invoices of special equipment that had been ordered by Seed Research Labs Limited (SRL), located in Pachamalai, a nondescript village nestled in the hills spread over Tiruchy and Salem districts of Tamil Nadu. The lab imported centrifugal equipment, purifying/ concentration processors and more. What piqued Priya’s interest was one odd detail. Although the name appeared like that of a Public Sector Undertaking (PSU) involved in seed research, a quick search of the registered PSUs did not reveal anything by that name.

She then tried to look up on the management of the company and locate its website but was running up against a wall. The website was just a single page that revealed nothing about what the firm did. Priya entered the address of the company and tried to get a satellite picture using Google Maps. To her surprise, the address was an open space with no real access road, except something like a walking trail you’d find along a jungle or countryside. What was this company doing in an isolated stretch of arid land, she wondered? All that equipment would need electrical power to run and yet she found no traces of power lines anywhere around. These were questions that bothered her till long after she went back home from work. Her mind raced, as she absently gobbled down her dinner.

The next morning, she called her childhood friend at the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO), Bengaluru, passed on the co-ordinates of SRL and requested her to send pictures of the area taken in half-hour intervals to trace any movement in the vicinity. The satellite could only give snapshots when it hovered over the area in two-hour intervals. The authorisation for the surveillance was routed through the official channels for the half-hour interval frequency feed.

The first batch of pictures revealed nothing. After a few days, she noticed a bullock-cart arriving with some material and unloading in the area. But in the next scan, it was gone. Smelling something fishy, she started back-tracking the path of the bullock-cart, which was proceeding rather slowly. The handoff happened in a small town called Top Sengattupatti, in the foothills of Pachamalai Hills. The nearest airport was Tiruchy or Coimbatore, and one could get to either from Top by road. Guided by her gut, she began researching all the manifests of imported equipment in Coimbatore. And she struck gold.

Several India-based and Dubai-based airlines operated flights from Dubai to Coimbatore. Tucked away in one of the flight manifests was the shipment meant for SRL. The shipper was one Abdul Hameed, resident of Kannur, Kerala, currently employed with a Dubai firm. The shipment seemed to be some kind of chemicals. The penny had dropped. Priya’s thoughts went back to her childhood days.

Growing up in her hometown in Kerala, she used to help her grandfather run his Ayurveda ashram. Every morning, they would go trekking to pick herbs and her grandfather would describe each plant and its properties, cautioning her against touching the poisonous ones. He would educate her on plants that were both medicinal and deadly.

Castor oil was a laxative commonly used in south Indian homes. Usually, a dose is administered to every member of the family every few months. Coupled with rest and good fluid intake, it proved to be an excellent detox. Priya remembered her grandfather telling her that eating the castor seed, on the other hand, could be fatal.

On a hunch, she searched for the produce grown in and around Pachamalai. Castor seed seemed to be the top pick. Motivated by this, she researched further. Occasionally, Karan would pop into her cubicle to check on her progress. She soon learned about a chemical named Ricin and how it could be extracted from the residual pulp after the castor oil was squeezed out. Ricin, she read, could result in death if ingested or inhaled, but had to be purified over several cycles for it to be an effective killing agent. This is where, she believed, SRL came in.

Priya suggested to the team that SRL be placed under discreet but intense surveillance. But doing that was difficult in a remote place. They decided to use low flying drones to watch the premises from a height, especially after dusk. Drones used infra-red technology to pierce through the darkness. If the SRL premises had people in it, there would surely be tell-tale signs like smoke from cooking etc.

The toxicity of raw castor beans is due to the presence of Ricin, she read. Although the lethal dose in adults is considered to be four to eight seeds, reports of actual poisoning are relatively rare. According to the Guinness Book of Records, castor is the world's most poisonous common plant. Overdose symptoms include nausea, diarrhoea and seizures, among others. They would persist for up to a week. The poison in castor can be extracted by concentrating the seed through a fairly complicated process, which is similar to that used for extracting cyanide from almonds.

For a while, Priya was dazzled and somewhat overwhelmed by all the information. It took her more than an hour to collate the material in a presentable form. Before she went to Mike and Karan, she wrote down a few points in her notebook.

One: Was SRL engaged in extracting Ricin?

Two: If yes, was it doing it with the necessary governmental clearances?

Three: Why was the company extracting Ricin? Was it for research purposes? If not, what was the motive?

Four: What steps should be taken, other than placing the firm under drone surveillance?

Her meeting with Mike and Karan lasted four hours as the three sorted through the information and drafted their responses. It was dark outside and the staff at the IB office, barring the helpers, had left for the day. Mike was not in favour of involving too many government agencies in the affair for fear of information leakage that could compromise the project. But he could not avoid keeping a few in the loop. He called up the Drugs Controller General of India and the Director of Food Safety and Standards Authority of India and asked them to provide information on the stated activities of SRL. He also asked for details of clearances, if any, that they had given to the firm. He wanted the information in less than twenty-four hours.

His last call of the day was made to the NSA. As it ended, Mike wondered if Amarnath was thinking along the same lines as he was.

Was Ricin going to be the next weapon used for a terror attack?

# 

## Re-opening an old case

The first six months of marriage had been bliss for Nafisa Bi. Her husband, Sadiq, cared for her, and so did her in-laws. When she wanted new clothes or jewellery, she got them. Soon after the wedding, the couple had spent a short but happy honeymoon at a popular hill resort of Ooty. She enrolled at a local college for her postgraduate degree and her new family wholeheartedly supported this. Nafisa believed that she could now finally close the door to her turbulent past. There were moments of anguish when she thought of her father, who had fought in the court for her return. She loved him dearly, and if only he had consented to her marriage, things would have been perfect. She had almost forgotten her earlier name, Smitha Mohan. She was so fully Nafisa Bi now.

Malappuram is a small picturesque town in the state of Kerala and, in the local language, it means a ‘terraced place atop the hills.’ The rock-cut caves are centuries old, adding to the unparalleled beauty of the hill town. Long ago, it was strongly influenced by Jain and Buddhist traditions and had been ruled by a variety of kings — the Zamorins and the Chera empire, for instance. It had been home to noted writer and poet V C Balakrishna Panicker, but this is where the notorious Varian Kannathu Kunjahammed Haji, leader of the infamous Mappila (Moplah) revolt had lived too. The Mappila revolt involved the slaughter of several hundred Hindus, with many Hindu women raped as well, in the 1920s.

The Malappuram of today is very different from its inclusive and tolerant ancient past. It is now dominated by the country’s main minority community and various radical outfits had mushroomed in the town. As a consequence, Malappuram had been under the scanner of various central intelligence and security agencies, although the local government had largely turned a blind eye to the hotbed of dangerous activities. The Nafisa Bi incident had rocked this hilltop town with much national media attention, and attracted renewed interest of the intelligence personnel.

It was a peaceful Sunday morning. Nafisa’s in-laws were on a pilgrimage to Mecca and Sadiq had gone to the market. She was comfortably settled on the sofa, watching her favourite television show on AsiaNet. Around lunchtime, Sadiq returned, accompanied by a man who looked forty-ish. She had never seen him before. He was introduced to Nafisa as just Iqbal. “Iqbal and I were in the same school. He is now doing rather well with his car rental firm. Iqbal *Mia* has contacts with travel agencies across the country,” Sadiq said.

Nafisa smiled in response and invited Iqbal at the dining table. She dutifully served them lunch — a simple dish of spicy fish curry and rice.

“Won’t you join us for lunch… Nafisa?” Iqbal said.

Nafisa politely declined and retreated to her room. Something about the way he said her name was disconcerting. But she brushed away the thought and went about her day.

A few days later, Iqbal visited again, this time with a laptop. Sadiq and he spent a couple of hours at the laptop, all the while discussing something in a low whisper. Nafisa wondered what they were up to. The third time Iqbal came was in the evening one day. Sadiq asked her to join them for dinner. She reluctantly agreed. While at the dinner table, Sadiq received a call and sauntered into the adjoining room to take it.

Iqbal began to chat casually with her. She was startled when he ‘accidentally’ brushed a hand against hers a couple of times.

“You look more beautiful each time I see you…Nafisa!” Iqbal said with a lewd smile.

After he left, she complained to her husband.

“Come on now, stop overreacting,” Sadiq said. Nafisa was shocked by his nonchalant response.

She forgot about it after a few days, though. Life slipped back to the usual routines. Late one evening, the doorbell rang, and Iqbal was there again, once more with his laptop. Nafisa refused to leave her room, asking Sadiq to serve themselves tea or dinner, whatever they wanted. Iqbal and Sadiq spent an hour together. There was a soft knock at her bedroom door. To her immense shock, she saw Iqbal walk in. Sadiq had left the house in the meanwhile, to take a stroll outside. Iqbal pulled her towards him, and when she protested, he laughingly said, “Don’t worry. I have your husband’s permission.”

Nafisa slapped him on the face and pushed him away, threatening to raise an alarm and call the neighbours. Iqbal left the house in a huff.

Sadiq was furious when Nafisa narrated her ordeal. But he was angry with her, not with Iqbal.

“You could have been a bit more cooperative.” Sadiq said with a casual shrug.

“Cooperative?”

“Why not? Iqbal is ready to invest Rs.5 lakhs so I can upgrade my small garage. It will make a big profit then, and-”

“Have you no shame?” Nafisa’s voice trembled with her rising anger.

He slapped her hard and she fell beside the bed, stunned by the pain and shock. This was a new Sadiq she had seen for the first time.

Realising that things were getting out of hand, he softened up and apologised after a while. A shaken Nafisa went to bed and wept all night.

Although Sadiq was extra nice with her over the next few days, her trust was shaken.

A few days later, Iqbal was back. He apologised profusely to Nafisa and promised that it would never happen again. Sadiq offered to prepare tea for the three. Nafisa refused to sit down with them. Sadiq literally pleaded. She reluctantly picked a cup and went back to her room. After tea, they got down to working at Iqbal’s laptop again.

Meanwhile, Nafisa had begun to feel dizzy and slumped on the bed. When she woke up the next morning, she still felt heavy and disoriented. Her body ached and burned. Slowly though, the truth dawned. She had been drugged and thereafter, raped through the night.

Sadiq was now a completely changed man. He told her curtly that this would not have happened if only she had cooperated. Strict restrictions were placed on her. If at all, she could go out only accompanied by her husband. Nafisa Bi’s life was suddenly changed, before she even realised.

Meanwhile, Iqbal started visiting more often. One day, she overheard him tell her husband that it was time for Nafisa to make a trip to Syria, where her services would be needed by their ‘brothers.’ She recalled with horror her father’s allegations in court that Sadiq was involved with Islamist terror outfits. And that women were often sent over to such outfits, where they were sexually exploited. Nafisa was an educated woman and would not take things lying down anymore.

One day, she told Sadiq that she knew of his plans and would not cooperate. He was furious and threatened her with instant triple *talaq* (divorce.)

“I will fight this.” She said determinedly.

“Whom will you go to? The clerics? You think Haji Pir Mohammad will entertain your plea?” He said derisively. “In case you haven’t figured out yet, the idea of luring you into this marriage was his.”

She was shocked but did not say anything.

“We need women to be of service for our soldiers who fight the war.” He pointed out dryly that since she had already burned bridges with her family, there was nowhere for her to go.

A young housemaid did the daily chores and Nafisa suspected that she too had been sexually exploited. While alone with her one day, she drew the housemaid into a conversation, and it was confirmed. Nafisa wrote a letter to her father and requested the housemaid to deliver it to him. The girl agreed reluctantly. The letter was an appeal for help. It sought forgiveness for all that she had done and explained the horror she was put through every day. She also wrote that her father’s accusations against Sadiq were true, and that she wished to return to her parents’ home, and to her religion.

Nafisa’s cry broke her father’s heart. He rushed to his lawyer and showed him the letter. Both knew that they could expect no assistance from the local administration or the government, although a case could be made of rape and unlawful confinement, on the basis of the letter. The courts were the only refuge. But the due process of the law had to be followed.

Accompanied by the lawyer, Nafisa’s father went to the nearest police station and lodged a complaint, attaching a copy of her letter with the FIR. Nothing happened for the next 15 days. They then approached the Kerala High Court, which promptly issued notice to the state government to respond in three weeks’ time. It also asked the police to not only register a case based on Mohan’s complaint but also to act on it.

Compelled to do something, the local police station in charge summoned Sadiq and Iqbal and demanded an explanation. Both denied all allegations. But since the court was involved, the police too couldn’t take this casually. The police registered a case under sections of the Indian Penal Code that covered rape and unlawful confinement.

There was a huge outcry among the local minority community members over the action and a procession headed by Haji Pir Mohammad was taken to the secretariat, in response to the police action. On behalf of the gathering, the Haji submitted a petition to the Chief Secretary, claiming that members of the community were being framed and that those who could not reconcile to the conversion of the woman to Islam, had been spreading falsehoods. The petition said that Nafisa may have written the letter under some domestic stress and that the leaders of the community could resolve the matter.

Meanwhile, Mohan’s lawyer had got in touch with a central intelligence agency official who had earlier conducted an inquiry into Sadiq’s links with radical Islamists. That probe had been pushed to the back burner after the Supreme Court had held Nafisa’s conversion and marriage valid. It was time to reopen it.

# 

## To raid or not to raid…

Although Mike and his team had considerable information on the SRL, they decided to gather more concrete evidence before approaching the NSA. Mike was well aware of Amarnath Verma’s penchant for details. He had often dismissed requests for coercive action based on inadequate material. The demand for infra-red camera loaded drones had been successfully processed and the ‘birds’ had been hovering over the site for some time now.

And then, late one night, the drones picked up activity at the site. A trap door opened from the ground letting six persons out, who slipped into the dark of the night. The door then closed promptly and before long, it was invisible. The ground looked as flat as it was before.

The drone was fitted with heat-sensitive technology that could locate the number of people working under the ground by reading heat signatures. It relayed that there were about 12 persons — about half were working while the rest were asleep in the bunkers. But what were they up to?

In the meanwhile, Priya had figured out that the laboratory was involved in creating high-purity Ricin from the chaff of castor seeds, that she now knew grew in abundance around the area. Having ascertained the presence of people in the premises, the team quickly also located the ducts that were pumping air in and out of the lab, camouflaged by a shrub. But she still had to find out how the unit was being powered. A diesel-based generator would create too much noise and also emit fumes, which would have been visible from outside. Yet, the place looked dead externally, with no sign of fumes emanating from any chimney.

Her next step was based entirely on a hunch. She asked for the electricity bills of all farms located around the lab and started looking at their power consumption patterns from the past two years. The search was narrowed to those which had backup diesel generators, a fact that she could cross-compare by looking at the generators sold in that area. The list was further pared down to two, and she found that one of the farms had registered an increase in power consumption by a whopping 150% in the last few months. A drone flew past the targeted farm and found a larger than required diesel-powered generator installed. Once the farm was located, she could trace out the path of wires that had snaked from the farmhouse to the lab.

Should they storm the lab or wait? It was not for them decide; the call had to be taken by the NSA. Mike suggested to Amarnath that they have a quiet word with the Power Grid Corporation of India Limited chief and request him to trim power supply to Pachamalai area by 15%. That done (the grid chairman took little to come on board), an official memo was circulated to the State Electricity Board that regular power supply was being curtailed for maintenance purposes and would be resumed soon. The area was already suffering four-hour power cuts a day, and it had gone up to six and then eight hours, as the industries in the region had bribed the electricity department to spare them from the rolling blackouts. As a result, the locals had to face longer power cuts. A small notice was placed in English and regional language newspapers about the proposed reduction, seeking cooperation from consumers.

The Power Grid Corporation of India Limited is a state-owned electric utilities company that transmits nearly 50% of the total power generated in India on its transmission network. Barring the 2012 power fiasco - the northern region grid which provides power to nearly nine states had collapsed in the dead of night, resulting in massive outages in the region including Delhi — its track record has been impressive, with credit rating agencies giving it a big thumbs up.

Karan was pleased with Priya’s work so far and he was particularly impressed with the way she had traced the source of power supply to the lab. The information she had dug out would be crucial for a crackdown.

Karan liked people who thought out of the box. He had topped his batch while Priya had stood fifth. As a young IPS officer, he had adopted some unconventional means of policing. He would go out of his way to find an amicable resolution that was eventually acceptable to the disputing parties in a strife, which would in turn prevent the crisis from escalating, thus often preventing long court hauls.

At the same time, he was uncompromising in cases of serious offence. Tall and built tough, he often overwhelmed people around him. As a young officer posted in Uttar Pradesh, he had ruthlessly cracked down on the sand mafia, disrupting the powerful politician-bureaucrat-business nexus. He had come to the Intelligence Bureau with the reputation of a doer. And lived up to it every day. Karan was also an academician of sorts. He had a doctorate in behavioural economics — a subject that flummoxed many in the IB. Had he not joined the police force, he would have certainly taught at Harvard University, which had sounded him for a position.

He was admired for his creative problem solving and also for the speed with which he solved the Rubik’s cube. He always had one in the office that he used for stress busting or a mind workout.

Inside the laboratory, there was chaos. Rehman Khan banged the table in frustration. The outages had begun to disrupt his work. The backup generator was unable to keep up with the load of work. It would take weeks to bolster the capacity, assuming that his person in the village, Muthu, could be contacted and persuaded to coax the farm owner with the offer of more money to acquire a bigger generator. The lab’s work had reached a critical stage and any delay at this point would be disastrous.

Rehman was a chemical and poison expert. He was educated in England and then moved to Dubai where he once worked in a forensics facility. But that felt like a lifetime ago. Pakistan’s ISI, which had spotted him, tried to first win him over with offers of large cash. When he refused, they placed his mother and sister under house arrest in their house in Sukkur, using local agents. They threatened to kill them if he refused to comply. He was asked to relocate to the SRL lab and create the purest form of Ricin possible. He was also told to come up with the best possible mechanism to deliver the poison.

Rehman had two options. He could make the Ricin into a spray form, which could then be released in a contained area such as an air-conditioned room or a Metro-train compartment. If an air-spray was to be the mechanism, it was important that there be minimum circulation of air in the target areas, else it would not be as effective.

Or he could convert Ricin into a powder. Ricin powder could be mixed in water and sprayed on flowers in a bouquet and presented to a VIP, with the assumption that the fragrance of the flowers would be alluring enough to make the target touch the flowers. This was a more difficult proposition as most leaders got bouquets by the dozen, which were passed on to the nearest security person around, who might just sniff the flowers and die, instead.

Just to be sure, he was asked to prepare both the options.

Javed Bhatti, the ISI handler for the project, too was in the bunker, and scouring the newspapers for information about the sudden increase in load shedding. While he suspected more than he read in the papers, he had no way of confirming his fears as yet. He was not happy with the pace of progress but could not afford to get any more equipment to speed it up, for risk of being noticed and caught. His other frustration was with the local translator Muthu, who could only speak broken Bollywood style Hindi and not comprehend the Urdu that Javed spat at him. Be patient, he told himself. Muthu was the one who kept going out of the lab on errands and was prone to hit the bottle hard. He did not want him opening his mouth about what was happening in the lab in some TASMAC bar.

Karan needed to find out where the six men who came out of the labs had disappeared to. He had a couple of IB operatives disguise and hang out at the nearest TASMAC bar to pick on gossip from the area. Karan’s hunch was right and with more alcohol doing the rounds, there was more talk. An operative picked up someone say that one Muthu suddenly seemed to have come into money and had begun acting smart. Such erratic behaviour in a village is easily noticed, and the IB promptly tagged Muthu as a person of interest.

Karan alerted his IB scouts to see if Muthu would go to the TASMAC bar the following evening. He arrived well before that, in the morning itself. Muthu was a habitual drunk and had been missing out on his favourite hangout because he was asked to stay in the underground lab for extended periods. By mid-afternoon, he was practically singing, except that he was incoherent. The IB officer recorded Muthu’s blather surreptitiously and determined that he was in no shape to divulge any useful information for the moment. He uploaded the conversation anyway and decided to tail the man. There was no point in apprehending him, certainly not when he could lead them to more crucial information.

Priya offered to attempt deciphering Muthu’s rant. Although a Malayali, she understood Tamil and could put together the gist of what Muthu had spoken. She could make out that there were two characters he was referring to as Nettai (tall for Tamil) and Kuttai (short); and how Nettai was yelling at him constantly. Karan and Priya surmised that the ISI handler must be the tall one and the scientist the short one.

Mike reasoned that since the lab workers must be using water, there should be chemical effluents being spewed from all the processing that was going on. Where was that being stored or redirected to? That too needed to be tackled urgently since it posed serious hazards for the population in the vicinity.

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## Sex slaves for Jihad

On the day of the hearing, the Kerala High Court pulled up the state government for failing to act on Nafisa’s complaint. The government countered saying that the police had registered a complaint against Sadiq and Iqbal, and that further action would follow. That it did not have any intention to act meaningfully, was not told to the judge. Nor was the court ever informed that the senior most police officials had assured the Haji Pir Mohammad that the police would find ways to diffuse the matter.

The court had directed the administration to produce Nafisa so that she could be questioned on the issue. Given that she had alleged rape, the judge had offered an in-camera hearing in his chamber, but Nafisa said that she had no problem in deposing before the open court; she had done no wrong and had no reason to feel any shame. She related the sequence of events leading to her violation and alleged that her husband and Iqbal were responsible for it. Shaken up but putting up a brave front, she also informed the court that her husband and Iqbal were plotting to send her to Syria to ‘service’ the jihadists working for the terror group, Islamic State. The judge was stunned by her revelations.

The lawyers for the two accused refuted her allegations and said she had made up these stories to frame her husband and his friend. They claimed that Nafisa had begun demanding large sums of money from her husband, threatening to implicate him if he did not oblige. As for rape, Iqbal’s lawyer said that it had been consensual sex.

The court demanded to know if Nafisa’s medical examination had been conducted, which was mandatory after she had lodged the FIR alleging rape. Nafisa informed that no medical examination had been done. The judge was furious, and it was obvious to the lawyers of the accused as well as the state’s advocate that the tide was turning against them.

Nafisa pleaded for her return to her parents’ home, as she was no longer safe at Sadiq’s place. She pointed out that neither the police nor the state administration had been cooperative, and it appeared they were complicit in the matter. At the end of a four-hour hearing, the judge ordered the state to provide police protection to her, banned Iqbal from visiting Sadiq’s house, directed that a medical examination be conducted, and set the next date of hearing for a month later. Sadiq was warned of grave consequences in case he mistreated her. The court said it would decide on Nafisa’s plea for return to her parents’ home at the next hearing.

Meanwhile, the ISI handler Javed, was busy managing the SRL fiasco. But he also had the additional responsibility of promoting Love Jihad in Kerala and neighbouring regions that had a considerable Muslim population. He received news coming from Malappuram with concern. The court was playing the spoiler and he wondered whether something should be done about the judge. But he rejected the idea because it could further complicate matters. He was banking on his network there, particularly the Haji, to contain the damage. Patience was critical for now.

It was patience that had helped Javed rise up the ladder, after all. He had been a low-level soldier in the Pakistani Army during the reign of General Zia-ul-Haq. When the military dictator launched his Islamic radicalisation programme in the army, Javed jumped on the bandwagon. He began to rat on those who were not following the new rules that General Zia had laid down. His superiors, who were falling head over heels to please the new dictator, would dutifully pass on critical information to him and earned accolades and promotions in return. As a consequence, Javed shot to limelight and even earned an audience with the dictator. Soon, he was shifted to the ISI, where the scope for his kind of murky work was enormous.

General Zia had a long reign before his death, and during that period Javed kept progressing. He became a senior operative in the agency and later took charge of the India operations. He entered India on a passport, which revealed neither his real name nor his occupation, or even his nationality. It showed him to be a Palestinian scientist employed by SRL to conduct seed research that would revolutionise agriculture in India. Those were the days in the mid-2000s when the Indian authorities treated Palestinians leniently, refusing to act even when allegations of dubious activities surfaced against them. Months after he relocated to India, his senior handlers at the ISI, based in Rawalpindi, had entrusted him with the task of spearheading what came to be known as Love Jihad.

Karan was engrossed in the SRL matter when a dossier marked ‘Top secret, Urgent’ landed on his desk. The file had made its way from the director’s office. It was the Nafisa Bi case and the director had cryptically noted: “Interesting new developments. Get in touch with your contacts in the CBI and take the matter forward. NSA concurrence received.” Karan would have to shift focus away from SRL, at least for some time. That didn’t bother him much, since Priya was doing a fantastic job and he was confident that she could handle the issue on her own until he could come back to it.

Karan called up the CBI officer in charge and spoke to him at length. This was a golden opportunity, both agreed, for the case to be reopened and pursued to its logical end. The government at the centre had changed and so had the mindset of the intelligence establishment. As was his habit, Karan immediately immersed himself in reading up every bit of information on the subject.

He learned, from a Reuters Institute report, about Nikah-ul-Jihad, a fatwa that had been issued in 2013 and had its roots in Tunisia. The fatwa suggested that women should offer themselves as sex slaves to jihadi fighters. The report said, “The purpose of this was purportedly to relieve a man of distracting sexual frustration during times of war.” The fatwa gave permission to a man to marry a woman for a week or even for a few hours, to have ‘halal’ sex with her. The fatwa had resulted in several women returning home pregnant or stricken with disease, having been abused by dozens of men.

The concept, Karan further read, had originated from the Saudi Wahhabi cleric, Sheikh Mohammad al-Arefe, who had called upon Sunni Muslim women to present themselves for sexual jihad, in support of Mujahideen fighting the Syrian Army of Bashar al-Assad. In present times, this concept gained ground especially in Islamic State-controlled regions in various countries. The bigoted clerics had dished out the justification that in the fight for Islam, even what is wrong, can be converted into ‘halal’ and become pious. Anything that serves the purpose of their faith is not only acceptable but also commendable.

His sense of disgust grew as Karan continued to read the Reuters Institute report. The IS had in 2014 captured areas around Kurdish Iraq, occupied largely by the Yezidi people, whose religion is similar to that of the Parsis. The IS had attacked villages, separated the men from the women, killed the men and taken the women as sex slaves. “The women are stripped naked and their bodies examined for breast size and attractiveness. Virginity tests were performed too. A price is decided, and the women are sold at a market, with the youngest and the prettiest fetching the highest price.” According to the report that Reuters Institute quoted, girls under nine years of age fetched the highest price. Everything done in the name of Islam and Allah, he noted with anger.

The IS had even released a pamphlet, offering guidance to its followers on the subject. Here’s a sample:

“What is al-Sabi?”

“Al-Sabi is a woman from the ahl-al-harb (people of war) who has been captured by Muslims.”

“What makes al-Sabi permissible?”

“What makes it permissible (to take such a woman captive and use her as a sex slave) is the fact that she does not believe in Islam. Non-believing women who are captured and brought into the abode of Islam are permissible to us, after the Imam distributed them (among us).”

Karan needed a mug of strong coffee to settle his nerves. He was sure that such disgusting practices were not limited to just the non-Muslim women. Even those who had been manipulated into converting to Islam, stood every risk of sexual exploitation. Nafisa Bi was indeed facing a grim future if she were not rescued.

However, Nafisa was a drop in the ocean. The investigation and intelligence agencies had to crack down on the larger conspiracy. He was aware that much damage had already been done, but further damage could be prevented.

The Kerala High Court had given the agencies an opening. Karan met Mike and suggested that the CBI’s lawyer approach the Supreme Court and seek to reopen probe into Love Jihad. Mike immediately contacted the CBI chief and passed on the advice.

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## The Cover is Blown

At moderate concentration levels, Ricin is not harmful, but in a highly purified form, it is fatal. The elaborate process of purification was being closely monitored by Javed and the blackmailed scientist, Rehman. The most reliable method to check the purity was the use of a Gas Chromatograph Meter (GCM) or an infrared spectroscope. The problem was that they cost the earth, and while the ISI had large funds at its disposal, the money had been thinly spread out on a variety of other causes, such as the training of militants, procuring firearms and propagating Love Jihad. Javed had to think of a creative solution that was both economical and not obvious to probe agencies. And he came up with one soon enough.

But that was not the end to their problems. All results had to be carefully recorded, tabulated and compared against references that Rehman had brought along from Dubai. Even after Ricin had been extracted to its most concentrated pure form, it had to be tested on a live being. This was another challenge as they needed lab rats.

After having done his groundwork on Love Jihad, Karan was back on the SRL project. He was pacing about in his hotel room in Chennai, where he had arrived to follow up on the lab’s functioning and confabulate with intelligence personnel posted there. As he watched the rush hour traffic head for the suburbs on the main artery, the Anna Salai, he kept going over the material in hand and the things needed to complete the process. He had been taught to think like a criminal and act like a policeman. It took him no effort to conclude that the lab would be having cutting edge equipment to purify the product to its lethal stage and rats to experiment upon. Rabbits would have been the other preferred option, but they were hard to find in this part of the country.

Karan was accompanied by Priya who had by then completely immersed herself in the investigations. They pored over all the manifests once again to see if any purity measuring equipment was shipped to SRL but drew a blank. They were missing something, Karan told Priya, as they ate a quick lunch in his hotel room. Their research had led them to the information that GCMs were used for purification purposes. The duo shifted attention to all Gas Chromatograph Machines imported to southern India to see if they could spot the odd one out. There were a handful that went into chemical research facilities or universities, and they all appeared to be above board.

Priya was not ready to give up. She hurried through the meal and once more went over the list of equipment imported by SRL, which came through at Coimbatore airport. Her heart jumped when she spotted the item, Electron Microscope (EM). She googled all the applications for an Electron Microscope and found that it was typically used to study thin specimens such as tissue sections, molecules etc. Why would SRL need an EM, she wondered, given their nature of work that the IB had already established?

This was not all. There was also the issue of effluents that still remained unsolved. Had SRL constructed a septic tank in the underground bunker? If so, where was all the dirt disposed? Was there a way to look at land records at the local panchayat office to see if this land had changed hands in the recent past? Could a trail be established from that?

It was decided that Karan would go to Pachamalai panchayat and Priya would fly down to Coimbatore to make discreet inquiries about the Electron Microscope. She hoped to get some information on who had signed for and taken the consignment. And, more importantly, how much did it weigh. An EM was about one fifth the weight of a GCM and one tenth its volume. Any anomaly there could amount to a lead.

Karan had little difficulty in getting access to land records at the panchayat office after he flashed his official ID card. The land in question had been bought by one Sterling Properties (P) Ltd, based out of Chennai. Interestingly, the price paid was four times the market rate, which the owner was only too happy to accept. He smelled a rat immediately.

Karan suspected Sterling to be a shell company and casually asked the panchayat official why he had not questioned the buyer’s motive to pay such a large amount. He knew that every real estate deal in Tamil Nadu needed bribing and wanted to make the official uncomfortable about it. Karan also hinted that the issue would be reported to higher authorities if the official refused to cooperate. The panchayat man finally said it all. The price paid was actually 10 times the market value and he had received a handsome ‘cut’ of 10% of the total deal, for not asking uncomfortable questions.

The panchayat official needed no further prodding, especially after Karan promised him immunity in exchange for the rest of the story. The man gave a rough blueprint of the region and said that the digging work had been taken up by a local contractor, whose name and number he managed to fish out. The cookie was beginning to crumble. Karan concluded that SRL had indeed dug an underground tank to store the effluents and septic waste. Tanks need to be pumped out periodically. The general frequency is between six and 12 months and the land had changed hands eight months ago.

Meanwhile, Priya had arrived at Coimbatore with a plan of action. She realised that her profile as an Intelligence Bureau officer might alert people. Who knew who might be a mole? Coimbatore had of late been in the news for smuggled goods, including contraband gold. Priya had come with an ID card that identified her as a senior functionary of the Directorate of Revenue Intelligence (DRI), an organisation that tracked the smuggling of various items, from drugs to bullion and counterfeit currency.

The DRI chief had been more than cooperative when Mike sought help with preparing a temporary identity for Priya. She had come upon the idea when Priya was already on her way to Coimbatore. The ID card was couriered and delivered to her soon after she had arrived. The officials at the DRI headquarters in New Delhi had been briefed, so that any query from Coimbatore Customs about a Priya Menon would be satisfactorily addressed.

The blue and gold logo of DRI made the customs chief stand up when she met him. He was several years older to her, due for retirement soon. He hoped that the last few months of his service would pass with ease and the arrival of this young officer did not bring any trouble. He had bought a small patch of land on which he hoped to build a modest house and settle down with his wife. His two children had married and migrated abroad. When Priya walked into his office, he was fantasising about his post-retirement life. The moment she flashed her new ID, he snapped out of the reverie and stood in attention.

He listened carefully while Priya showed him a dozen invoices that had passed through customs and asked to see the officials who had inspected them. There must be records of someone who must have signed for these, with their home address, age, father’s name, village name, name of the first born (a legacy left over from a suspicious British system), and so on.

And so it came to be known that Sterling Enterprises, based in Chennai, had signed for the consignment and loaded it in a container lorry bearing the licence number TN-99-681A. Code 99 referred to Coimbatore and so it was possible that the lorry was locally registered. Priya then looked up the motor vehicles database to run down the address of the container lorry.

“Thanks for all your help. And wish you a joyful retirement,” she said, shaking hands with the customs chief. She left while he was still thinking up a similar farewell greeting to return.

A quick trip to the lorry godown filled the blanks. It had been heavy equipment that was transported on a rainy night to Pachamalai, needing several people to offload it at a shed near the village. It could not have been an Electron Microscope. It must surely have been a Gas Chromatograph Meter.

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## Hot on the Trail

In the years of the Freedom Party’s rule, any talk of Love Jihad would be brushed aside as fabrication by Hindutva groups. The entire state machinery was deployed to downplay such incidents and squarely blame overzealous Hindu organisations to malign the Muslim community. After the Supreme Court had upheld Nafisa Bi’s conversion and marriage, the ‘secular’ lobby both in Kerala and the rest of the country had trotted about, displaying vindication of their position. However, with the recent twist in the case and the formation of a new government at the centre, they were on the defensive.

Besides, a new front had opened against them. A senior official of the National Commission for Minorities (NCM) wrote to the union government, alleging that Christian girls in Kerala had become soft targets for recruiters of Islamist terror. The functionary, himself a Christian, claimed that innocent Christian girls were being trapped through Love Jihad. He warned of an outbreak of communal disharmony if action was not taken immediately. He also called for a through probe by the National Investigation Agency that is mandated to investigate terror-related activities.

His remarks came after two shocking incidents that were widely reported in the media. In the first, the family of a Christian girl alleged that she had been sedated and raped by the accused, who had also filmed the act. She was then blackmailed into conversion to Islam. The family said that the girl had earlier been asked to convert but when she refused, she was abducted and raped. The second incident, the NCM official said, related to a Christian girl being kidnapped from Delhi and sent to a West Asian country to ‘serve’ the jihadists.

The NCM’s missive to the centre took the Muslim radical lobby by surprise. Through the years, it had managed the minority commission effectively, ensuring that the spotlight stayed on the Hindu community and its supposed misdeeds. This served the radical groups’ agenda of discrediting Hindu organisations such as the Vishwa Hindu Parishad and the BNS, which were at the forefront of speaking out against Love Jihad. The NCM member’s revelation had suddenly pitted the Christian community too against the Islamists.

Amarnath had taken note of the issue after the letter was sent to him by the Home Ministry. He got in touch with the National Investigation Agency and suggested that the NIA take over all related cases, including Nafisa Bi’s. There were wider ramifications and it would be appropriate if the NIA, rather than the CBI, dealt with them. Amarnath also pointed out that the issue was not about inter-religious marriage but of global terrorism. He said that if the NIA could unravel the conspiracy, it would go a long way to dispel the impression created by vested groups that the People’s Voice government was targeting the minorities.

Javed wiped the sweat off his face with the back of his hand as he read about these new developments. He was already struggling with the SRL issue where work was rapidly slipping behind schedule thanks to the power outages. He had a tough time trying to offer credible explanations to his superiors in Pakistan. For the first time in his life, he was staring at two potential failures, and there was no telling how it would impact his career. His life, indeed. He knew well that once the NIA got cracking, it would uncover the Love Jihad conspiracy, perhaps sooner than later.

Meanwhile, the Kerala High Court began hearing on Nafisa Bi’s case on the appointed day. There had been no fresh developments — neither had the accused been nabbed nor had Nafisa’s medical examination been done. The judge was understandably furious. He threatened to initiate contempt of court proceedings against the state’s Chief Secretary, and forthwith ordered the local administration to ensure that Nafisa was brought to her parents’ home safely and both Sadiq and Iqbal were arrested and tried. Signalling an end to the day’s proceeding, the court fixed a date — two months from then — for further hearing.

Haji Pir Mohammad met the Chief Minister and openly threatened him. “Remember Sir, elections are coming up. I can ask the Muslim community to not vote for the ruling party, if the police so much as touched Sadiq and Iqbal.”

“I get it. But you need to understand too that it’s a delicate matter for the government. We cannot ignore the court’s directive,” the Chief Minister said.

Haji Pir Mohammad refused to budge. Finally, the Chief Minister had to give an assurance that the accused would be arrested, and when their application for bail came up, the state administration would not oppose it. That is how they were free on bail within a fortnight.

Meanwhile, the NIA had begun to make progress on the Love Jihad issue, including the Christian girls’ cases raised by the NCM. Unfettered by political pressure, they went straight for the jugular. The NIA Director constituted four special teams and reached out to the Research & Analysis Wing (RAW) for inputs on at least half a dozen Indians who had gone abroad and joined the IS jihadists. One of the teams interviewed Nafisa and recorded her statement, and then interrogated Iqbal and Sadiq. They raided Iqbal’s home and seized his laptop as well as a bunch of provocative religious literature. Before the local police could act, the two were arrested by the NIA and brought to Delhi, where they were subjected to intense interrogation.

It took a few days for them to crack under the pressure, but when they did, they proved to be a mine of information. Iqbal confessed to having been in touch with radical outfits in West Asia through his local handler, Haji Pir Mohammad. He had pulled Sadiq into the game plan. He said that luring Smitha Mohan and her conversion and marriage was the Haji’s idea. Iqbal informed that Pir Mohammad took orders from someone ‘above,’ but he was not aware of who that was.

The NIA team of officials returned to Malappuram and accosted the Haji. They faced some trouble getting into his house because the cleric’s supporters, who had gathered outside in large numbers, had blocked the way. The local police stood aside, refusing to assist the NIA officials stating that it would lead to a law and order problem for which the police would be held responsible. Meanwhile, Pir Mohammad slipped away through the back door. After a week of constant effort, they found him hiding in a nearby jungle. The team brought him to Delhi for interrogation, with the two other accused already in their custody.

Meanwhile, a battery of lawyers appeared out of nowhere to take up Pir Mohammad’s case. Some of them were from the ousted Freedom Party. When the issue of his custody came up before a local court, his lawyers accused the agency of deliberately seeking to malign a respected cleric who had no previous record of unlawful conduct. They said that the NIA was acting at the behest of its political masters to ruin the reputation of an entire community.

The NIA presented the confessional statements of both Iqbal and Sadiq to the trial judge and sought to keep them in custody for another fortnight. The court gave the agency seven days. At the jail, Pir Mohammad was subjected to serious interrogation. He had never faced such intense stress before and immediately cracked. He confessed that he had been in touch with Javed Bhatti, who was the India handler. It was indeed his idea to lure Smitha Mohan into conversion and marriage and to send her abroad to ‘help’ Allah’s army fighting for an Islamic order. The statement was duly recorded as per law.

A major welcome change that had come about with the arrival of the new government was better coordination among the various probe agencies. When the IB learned of the new developments, it immediately contacted the NIA and briefed them about its ongoing investigation on Javed. The next task was to net in the ISI agent. Now, the Intelligence Bureau had to take a decision on raiding the SRL premises. With the evidence mounting, Mike felt that any further delay could help Javed escape. It was possible that he may have been warned already. The order was given.

Late in the night, a team of crack agents descended on SRL labs and took everybody in custody. But Javed had flown the coop. He was alerted by an acolyte of Pir Mohammad. The scientist Rehman Khan spilled the beans on how Javed forced him to make half a dozen canisters of Ricin, which could be activated using a cell phone. The canisters were modified portable fire extinguishers that did not look too different from the ones commonly found in the market. The only saving grace was that the Ricin had not been tested for effectiveness yet. When pressed, Rehman admitted that it was 90% pure, based on the GCM readings and could be potentially harmful if released in a closed environment like an air-conditioned room or a Metro compartment.

Javed had a head start of about six hours. Karan wondered if one of his targets could possibly be the new Metro rail extension in Kochi that the Prime Minister was going to inaugurate on Saturday that week. If Ricin was going to be released in a Metro train coach, Karan figured that three canisters would be used for maximum effect. One at each end and another in the middle. Just to be safe, all three would be rigged to the same cell phone. Without letting on, he needed confirmation from Rehman that this indeed was the plan.

Rehman broke down and felt immensely sorry for himself. He was in a country without proper papers and forced into unethical work.

“Sir, I have been so worried about my mother and sister. I don’t even know if they are still alive,” he said, between sobs.

“I could find out about your family, Rehman,” Karan said, sitting him down. He offered Rehman a glass of water and continued, “But I need your help to know where and how Javed intends to use the Ricin.”

Rehman gulped down the water and breathed hard through his mouth. When he stopped crying, he managed to say, “I’m not sure of the details. But I overheard Javed tell his boss that they would target the Metro rail extension in Kochi.”

“Okay. Anything else you might know?”

“Yes, he planned it in a way that one cell phone could simultaneously set off the three canisters. One more set was prepared as backup.”

“Thank you Rehman. This is crucial for us. I promise I will enquire about your family,” Karan said, reassuringly.

Rehman looked a tad better.

“I have one more question. Is there a way to thwart the detonation? Let’s say if on the inauguration day, all cell signals were to be jammed, would the canisters still detonate?”

“Yes, I would think so,” Rehman said.

But Javed had a Plan B for just this eventuality.

Javed was making good headway. Instead of taking the shorter route via Coimbatore, he decided to go to Trichy and onwards to Nagapattinam on the coast, where he had a pre-arranged pickup point. He hitched a ride on a lorry till Trichy and then took a state transport bus from there to Nagapattinam. By the time Karan figured out what Javed was up to, he was already holed up in a safe house in Nagapattinam.

Karan knew Javed was resourceful. He was banking on the fact that carrying six canisters would slow Javed down. Surely someone must have spotted him on the road to Pachamalai. The roadside tea shop owner proved helpful. He had seen a tall, fair man flagging a lorry going towards Trichy and getting into it. He obviously did not look out for the licence plates but remembered that the lorry was painted light blue.

Karan intimated the police about the ISI operative. A police artist was hastily summoned to Pachamalai to draw a sketch of Javed, which was faxed to all police stations in the districts of Trichy, Nagapattinam, Madurai, Tirunelveli and Thoothukkudi.

Karan was simultaneously trying to figure where Javed was headed. It was a two-hour super-fast drive from Pachamalai to Trichy. Every so often, Karan would stop to check if a light blue-coloured lorry had passed by. But the trail went cold when he reached Trichy. It was as if Javed had melted into nothingness.

But when he least expected it, he got lucky. A police jeep in Nagapattinam had stopped by a tea shop on the way and when the officer showed the sketch around, the shop owner recognised Javed. “Hard to miss,” he said. It was rare to find fair skinned people here, what with the sun beating down mercilessly almost through the year. Karan was notified immediately, and he knew that Javed was somewhere near the coast, perhaps waiting for a ride by the sea.

By now Karan had developed a sixth sense about Javed. At every turn, he was doing the unexpected. Nagapattinam had a fair amount of Muslim population, many of whom spoke Urdu. It would not be easy to smoke Javed out. But since he knew that Javed would be heading for Kochi, Karan decided to fly out from Trichy to Kochi and wait for him there. Just to be sure, he requested the coast guard to keep close watch on all outbound fishing vessels, especially those that headed towards Sri Lanka from Nagapattinam.

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## Punishment, at last

Pir Mohammad was lodged in Delhi’s Tihar jail after the NIA had taken him into custody from the court. During the interrogation, he had already confessed to having been in contact with Javed and explained his role in Love Jihad not just in Kerala but also the neighbouring state of Karnataka. The NIA soon had a list of clerics based in the two states that were involved in targeting young Hindu and Christian women for Love Jihad.

Armed with this information, the NIA told the court at the next hearing that they needed to retain Pir Mohammad because they wanted to verify the material he had provided them. They were concerned that the cleric might interfere with the investigations and influence witnesses if he were released on bail. The agency also feared that Pir Mohammad would escape. The Haji’s lawyers vehemently opposed the appeal, claiming that the NIA had secured all the information they needed from him and that the demand for further custody was unjustified. They also tried to impress upon the judge that Indian laws worked on the premise that bail was the rule while custody was an exception. After all, their client had been cooperative and had no intentions of running away and living like a fugitive.

The trial court judge made it known that an accused could not be kept behind bars for long, more so since even a chargesheet had not been filed, let alone charges being framed. But given the sensitivity of the case, the court agreed to a further four days of custody and made it clear that no more extensions would be allowed unless the NIA came up with serious evidence against him. Pir Mohammad was marched back to prison.

Meanwhile, Nafisa’s case was proceeding at a slow pace. While she was back at her parents’ home, she waited for the High Court judge to decide on the validity of her marriage and conversion in the light of the fresh evidence that had been presented to the court. But nothing stopped her from deciding on her next course of action — reconverting to Hinduism. At an elaborate ceremony conducted in a nearby temple, Nafisa Bi gave up Islam and returned home as Smitha Mohan.

It sparked outrage among the minority community, particularly the followers of Haji Pir Mohammad. They alleged that the Hindu organisations had forced her into the act. Since the court proceedings were still ongoing, status quo could not be changed. One of Pir Mohammad’s students even went to the High Court but received a stinging rebuke. The court questioned his locus standi. Besides, it stated sternly that nothing in the ongoing proceedings had prevented Nafisa from a religious reconversion.

NIA teams visited Karnataka and opened inquiries with the clerics that Pir Mohammad had named in his statement. They were shocked to discover a well-oiled network that had been working to promote Love Jihad. Even more shocking was that state authorities, like in Kerala, had turned a blind eye to everything that was going on. The NIA officials worked 24X7, and by the time the court convened to hear the Kerala clerics’ case once again, they had gathered enough material to arrest four Muslim religious leaders in connection with Love Jihad. The NIA did not press for further custody of Pir Mohammad, confident that they could get him at will. Moreover, it was time to start investigating the elaborate network and to build a solid initial case against the Karnataka clerics. It also started work on the cases of the Christian women quoted by the senior member of the National Commission.

It was a tricky jigsaw and it would take the NIA many months — almost a year — to uncover the conspiracy. Along the way, there were times when it felt like the case was cracked. But the more they looked, the more dirt they uncovered. The good part was that several players who would have otherwise got away, were nabbed. Besides Kerala and Karnataka, Love Jihad operations were found in Telangana and Tamil Nadu as well. When the NIA began to question suspects in Telangana, a prominent Muslim leader who enjoyed political support in the capital city of Hyderabad, took to the streets in protest, along with hundreds of his lumpen followers.

He was the chief of a party which not just sounded brazenly communal but was actually so in reality. The supremo’s brother had once dared the government at a public gathering, to move aside the police for just 15 minutes, which was time enough to wipe out the Hindus from the city. The party chief found everything wrong with the Hindu way of life and everything justified with Islam. He was also pulled up in the past for objectionable remarks on dividing the Indian Armed Forces along religious lines as well.

But he considered himself secular and also projected a matching image. Electorally though, his success was limited to the old city of Hyderabad, largely populated by the Muslim community. His party had picked up a couple of assembly seats in Maharashtra, but that was more due to the lack of understanding among nationalist parties rather than any real breakthrough for him. Interestingly, his party had been repeatedly rejected even in Muslim-dominated constituencies of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar.

His party was always on the lookout for issues that could further their communal agenda. The NIA’s crackdown on clerics In Telangana had provided them just that excuse. They said that the new Right-wing government at the centre had unleashed terror among the country’s minorities and fabricated stories about a non-existent Love Jihad. They blamed the government for using agencies such as the NIA and the Intelligence Bureau to arm-twist its opponents. His accusation was promptly seized upon by the opposition parties, and both the Home Minister and the Finance Minister from the Dhillon government, who had allowed the proliferation of Islamist extremism during their term, condemned the agencies’ efforts.

The Hyderabad Muslim party’s leader was largely helpless before the NIA’s persistent drive to flush out the Love Jihad clerics along with their victims and accomplices. As a desperate measure, he announced that his party would bear the legal expenses of all those who were being ‘wrongly’ arrested and ‘framed.’ This was not out of any particular love for the clerics but to keep up his image with the community. It was no coincidence that one of the senior most religious leaders nabbed (a Maulana), had been a regular at the Muslim party’s public rallies, exhorting the people to vote for the party, else it would be deemed as an act of betrayal of the Muslim faith.

The Jadeja government was not really bothered by such outbursts. Instead, it believed that the more opposition parties and other organisations criticised it for supposedly targeting the minorities, the more its support would grow among the larger section of the country’s masses. This is one reason why the government had adopted an aggressive approach towards the issue. It was clear in its stand that while it would discriminate among none, it would also not appease anybody. The message was unambiguous: The days of pandering to the minority’s demands were over. And if leaders of the country’s principal minority community were determined to polarise voters, then a counter-polarisation, larger in number and impact, would occur in the ruling party’s favour.

Away from these political equations, the Kerala High Court was preparing to deliver its verdict in a clutch of cases relating to Smitha Mohan’s conversion and marriage. Nearly two dozen sections of the Indian Penal Code had been invoked in the course of trial, including unlawful confinement, rape and conversion by deceit. The accused had serious charges of anti-national activities slapped by the NIA under the stringent Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act. There were, of course, other cases of Love Jihad that had been initiated in other states, but they were still in the early stages. Many experts believed that the Kerala High Court verdict could impact ongoing investigations in the other cases. The High Court found merit in the charges and directed a trial court to decide on them, within six months.

More than a year after Smitha Mohan had approached the High Court with her plea, the trial court gave its verdict. The judge ruled her conversion to Islam as being null and void, as it had been achieved by misleading her. He struck down her marriage to Sadiq on similar grounds; he held Iqbal guilty of rape and Sadiq guilty of being complicit in the act. It pronounced Haji Pir Mohammad, the local “kingpin” of promoting terrorism through the propagation of Love Jihad. Various levels of punishment were meted out.

Smitha couldn’t hold her tears. “Amma! Appa!” She hugged her parents hard. She had been vindicated and so were the government agencies that had worked tirelessly to secure the convictions. Eighteen months ago, she was in the news for walking out of her father’s home and taking to Islam. Now, she was back in the headlines for being a crucial link to crack down on the Love Jihad network. At least, it amounted to opening the lid to the can of worms.

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## The Assassin Arrives

Javed gave himself a quick makeover after he had fled from the SRL premises. He trimmed his hair in a military crop, dyed it black and shaved off his beard. For good measure, he applied *vibhuti* (sacred ash) on his forehead with a *chandan* mark right between the eyebrows. His host was taken aback at the transformation. Javed looked like a devout Hindu.

He packed all his clothes in a rucksack and made sure the suitcase carrying the canisters was always within sight. Javed asked his host to visit the market and buy checked *lungis* (usually worn by Muslims) along with a couple of *veshtis* (a sarong-style bottom wear worn by Hindu men in southern India), as well. He then washed the new clothes to make them look well-used rather than new.

He told his host that he wanted to stay close to the shore on a fishing trawler, out of sight. He would then hop his way south to Rameswaram, another area where he could stay safe. Every time he changed boats, he changed his appearance as well — *lungis* instead of *veshti*, one time donning a cap, another time wrapping a piece of cloth round his head. He hoped to outfox the IB sleuths now hot in pursuit.

The 160-km journey to Rameswaram took about eight hours. It was late in the evening when he landed at a spot close to Rameswaram. He was greeted by a guide who would help him get around the police check-posts. The path led through dense palm and coconut groves. They finally reached a waiting SUV, into which he flopped and closed his eyes instantly. The driver knew that he had to take his passenger due west on NH-744 and then north to Alappuzha (Alleppey).

By the time they reached their destination, it was four in the morning. The town was still asleep as Javed knocked on the door of Imtiaz Ali’s house. A bleary-eyed Imtiaz was not expecting any visitors, and it took him a while to recognise the tall person standing at his doorstep. The man was one of the three strangers who he had hosted in his house a few months back. Javed didn’t imagine he would come back here ever after the Sri Lanka terror attacks that he and his two friends were involved in. Imtiaz had been a good courier, bringing them all that they had needed to assemble the weapons that were used. The man had never opened his mouth. But Javed knew that staying here was not the safest of options. He didn’t have much of a choice, though.

Javed told Imtiaz sternly that he needed to stay for a few hours at his house before moving to where he was headed. Imtiaz hurriedly moved his two daughters out of their bedroom and ushered Javed in. The girls were not too happy being hustled out of their room in the night and cursed the visitor under their breath.

Karan had figured that Javed would show up at one of the three persons’ homes close to the shore (one of them being Imtiaz Ali) and would be able to make a quick getaway should the need arise. A plainclothes officer watching Imtiaz’s house spotted activity, and seeing the tall figure move out, alerted Karan immediately. An order was given out to apprehend Javed on the spot.

It was a one-on-one situation. The officer was armed but Javed was a trained assassin. As the sleuth knocked on Imtiaz’s door, Javed got suspicious. He was also surprised that the Indian officials were so quick on his tail. He had no way of knowing that the IB had been tracking him through his entire journey. He looked around wildly and chanced upon an exit door at the back. He took his chance, hoping that no one would be guarding the rear entrance. And he was lucky. Imtiaz took a few minutes to open the main door, by which time, Javed had slipped away.

After knocking a few blows on Imtiaz, the officer discovered three fire extinguisher canisters that Javed had left behind while scurrying out. This was a good development as the bomb disposal squad would be able to analyse what Javed had on him.

Karan was infuriated, though. He had no way of knowing that there was a rear door in the house. He made it a point to raise the issue with the people who had recced the house earlier; they ought to have spotted the second exit. Meanwhile, the bomb disposal squad had disassembled the canisters and confirmed that the content in them was Ricin. The purity was about 89% — not as lethal as 99% but still dangerous enough, if an adequate quantity was inhaled.

The NSA was updated. He had to take a call: Should Prime Minister Jadeja’s visit to Kochi be cancelled or should it go ahead as planned? To go as per plan would amount to handing over the Prime Minister on a platter to the ISI. If they cancelled his plan, it would alert the ISI that the Indian intelligence had identified the target, thus prompting it to strike elsewhere, which could be anywhere.

If Javed was not caught before the inaugural run of the Kochi Metro, perhaps the Prime Minister could just flag off the service rather than take a ride in the Metro, as was the original plan. Of course, that would still be risky for the lives of the first set of travellers. The NSA liked to believe that Karan would pull a rabbit out of the hat and still be able to nab Javed. If not, there was a Plan B, but he did not want to think about it.

The new railcars for the Metro train had roof-mounted ventilation units made by Lloyd’s, a reputed manufacturer. Oblivious to the danger lurking around the corner, the engineers were conducting a final test run on air-conditioners with passengers in the compartment, to test the cooling system.

The power line for Kochi Metro ran parallel to the rails, as a third rail. Karan figured that if they made sure that nobody climbed on to the roof of a Metro car, chances of fitting a fire extinguisher in the cramped roof-mounted ventilation unit would be difficult. The more he thought about it, the more it occurred to him that perhaps Javed had a different idea. If so, what was it? How else would he be directing the poison? He recalled from his research that a Russian journalist had died after being poked by the tip of an umbrella, which had Ricin on it. That was in the 1970s. The security detail around the Prime Minister should ensure that no one came close.

The NSA made a note to himself that he should not let the Prime Minister mingle with the crowds, as he usually did. He could wave at the crowds from an open car, but that was it. It would be difficult for the security agencies since Prime Minister Jadeja was a man of the masses and loved nothing more than to walk towards a crowd of people, breaking all security protocol, mingle with them and even shake hands. It was a nightmare for his security detail. Rather than exiting at the earliest in his armoured vehicle, he was known to walk towards children waiting to greet him at the Independence Day or Republic Day events. He was as fond of mingling with people as they were to have him in their midst.

It was a Saturday morning and the road from Kochi airport to the Metro station was filled with crowds gathered hours before the Prime Minister’s arrival. There was an air of festivity with colourful flowers and garlands being readied to shower on him.

Javed had chosen his spot carefully. During the recce, he had spotted a bend in the road and a multi-storeyed house that afforded a good view of the main road below. He loaded his modified rifle with the needle-syringe containing Ricin instead of a bullet and settled down to a long wait. It was worth it, he said to himself. If he succeeded, there would be shockwaves in not just India but the whole world. He would have done his duty to Allah.

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## The Innovative Assassination Bid

Karan was racing against time. He called up the Kochi Metro chief and expressly told him to not allow anyone except the most essential personnel near the Metro. Nobody other than those already with security clearance should be allowed till the Prime Minister finished the run. He got half a dozen guards posted around the Metro rail coaches to ensure that no one came even remotely close. Karan had earlier got in touch with the chief of the elite Special Protection Group (SPG) that formed the inner circle of the Prime Minister’s security and told him categorically to prevent the Prime Minister from mingling with the excited crowds.

Priya, who was here as well thanks to her fluency in Malayalam - a language that most mid-level Metro staff would talk in - moved around as the crowd continued to grow. While she kept an eye out for anything out of place, she casually struck a conversation with the people around, but could pick nothing out of the ordinary. Everything seemed to be proceeding as per plan. She could not afford to get complacent, though.

Karan sat with his Rubik’s cube for a moment. Something about Javed was just not adding up. Why would he turn up at Imtiaz’s residence, for instance, despite knowing that Imtiaz was under the agency’s radar? Javed also knew that the Intelligence Bureau had sniffed the Ricin plan and would follow up on the potential threat at the inauguration of the Kochi Metro services. In other words, Javed had conveniently left an easy trail for Karan to follow. Even the most intelligent criminal would make a mistake and that becomes his undoing. And yet, this seemed too simple to be believable.

On an impulse, he called up Tihar jail, where Rehman Khan, the rogue scientist, was being held. An IB officer held a cell phone against Rehman’s ear as Karan asked, “What was Javed’s Plan B? If he could not release the canisters, what was he going to do?”

Rehman said, “At every stage of purification, I was asked to prepare both the powder and the liquid versions. The liquid had to be compressed and then loaded into the canister,” he explained.

Karan asked, “But surely you would have excess liquid, right? What did you do with it?”

“It was stored in vials bearing the date of manufacture,” he answered matter-of-factly.

Something occurred to Karan suddenly and he asked, “Did Javed carry syringes?”

“Yes.”

It slowly dawned on Karan that Javed would perhaps try and shoot a syringe to deliver the poison. The more he thought about it, the more he was convinced that this was what the ISI handler had planned all along and cursed himself for not guessing it sooner. Extracting Ricin from a vial into a syringe, fitting it to a rifle and firing from a distance of 20-30 feet would be feasible, especially when the Prime Minister was surrounded by people. It was also the perfect setting for the shooter to easily blend in with the crowd and scoot. He recalled from the profile he had read that Javed was an ace shooter during his military days.

Mahatma Gandhi, John F Kennedy, Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King among many other prominent figures in history were assassinated using firearms. Gandhi was shot from close range with a small gun. Kennedy was brought down by a sniper using a rifle. Lincoln was shot at in a theatre after the doors of the hall were tampered with from the inside so that they could not be opened. King was shot dead by the assassin who had located himself in a rooming house and waited for his target to appear in the balcony of a motel nearby. Javed was apparently planning to add a first in this list, by assassinating an Indian leader — no less than a Prime Minister - using a poison dart shot from an improvised rifle.

Javed reached his spot a full hour ahead of the time when the Prime Minister’s cavalcade would pass. He checked his rifle scope to ensure that it was dirt free. He was wearing special purpose gloves to avoid touching the Ricin. He planned to aim the syringe at the target’s carotid artery. The Prime Minister would feel a pinprick, not unlike a mosquito bite. The syringe was a mere two centimetres long. Everything would be fine for a while till the nausea and other symptoms set in. Since the poison would have entered the blood stream, there would be no way to undo it. The only critical factor was the purity (and hence effectiveness) of the poison. This, Javed thought, was wonderful. A bullet could hit the target but not always result in death. But Ricin was certain to do the job.

Since the prime ministerial cavalcade would move at a snail’s pace, given the huge crowds on the streets, Javed felt confident of being able to get his target.

The Prime Minister’s entourage came to sight finally. Prime Minister Jadeja was in his usual exuberant mood, waving to the crowds, and occasionally bringing his palms together in greeting. The SPG personnel had thrown a ring around him, their eyes darting in all directions. They had been briefed to be extra careful today. The Prime Minister had been advised to travel in his armour-plated official vehicle, but he had insisted on an open SUV. He did not want to cut himself off from the masses. This was something that Javed had anticipated correctly. Had the Prime Minister come in a closed vehicle, Javed would have had to wait for him to alight and then shoot. That would have drastically reduced the chances of hitting the target with precision.

Javed waited for the right opportunity. As a seasoned sniper, he knew that patience was critical. He finally had a good view of the Prime Minister’s carotid artery in his telescopic sight. He pressed the trigger.

It was just at that moment that the Prime Minister bent down to pick a garland that had been tossed at him that was dangling from the vehicle’s bonnet. As he stooped forward, the syringe missed his neck. It hit the side of the windscreen and then toppled on one side of the bonnet. Karan saw the metallic flash as the syringe fell away.

The next few minutes were contained chaos. The security personnel instinctively closed round the Prime Minister, and one of them carefully retrieved the syringe, using plastic gloves. Hasmukh realised that he had escaped a possible assassination bid but behaved as if nothing had happened. He continued smiling and waving to the people. They were blissfully unaware of how close their beloved Prime Minister had come to being killed.

Karan quickly worked out the direction from where the syringe was fired and turned to look there. It was just in time that he saw the barrel of a rifle being withdrawn hastily. He spoke into his earpiece and informed his associate, who was about 20 feet behind the cars, to quickly move to the building and nab the man.

Javed had just one shot and he had missed. It was time to flee. He needed to move quickly. There was no time to clean up the rifle, which was assembled from bits and pieces sent over a period of time through various couriers. He snapped his rucksack shut and decided to hop from building to building as quickly as possible, far away from the procession.

Karan saw what Javed was up to and realised that he needed to somehow get ahead of him. He had to have men from his team come from the opposite direction and confront him. He rattled off more instructions, describing the man’s attire and the backpack and told his men to be extremely careful. He urgently barked his instructions to the team: “Do not hesitate to shoot him. If he can’t be captured alive, kill him.”

Security officials recovered the canisters and a few more syringes from the spot Javed had chosen. The owner of the place was located and with some persuasion, spilled the beans on how the rent for the building was paid for a whole year in advance and in cash. The owner could not remember who it was that gave the money. All he had done, the frightened man said, was take the money and hand over the key. The amount was so alluring that he did not bother to follow procedure and ask for the stranger’s identity.

The inaugural run of Kochi Metro went off well, and everyone heaved a sigh of relief. Priya had been with the Prime Minister all along, till he boarded his flight back to New Delhi.

Hasmukh smiled at his sombre staff onboard. He even joked with the chief of security. “It looks like I have grown popular. What say?”

Javed had managed to slip away. Yet again. The team was relieved that the Prime Minister was safe. Karan congratulated them on a job well done. Priya noticed the undercurrent of tension in him, though. She knew that he was still upset about the rear door fiasco. They both realised that while the immediate danger had passed, there would be no respite till Javed was nabbed.

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## Deal-maker turns Politician

After the comprehensive losses that her Freedom Party suffered in the general elections, Dipika had gone into a shell. Some senior members had deserted the party and jumped ship to the ruling dispensation, while a few others had begun to show their dissatisfaction at the state of affairs. The dedicated few plodded on, encouraging her with prospects of a return to glory in the next polls, which was still a long way away. Gulab made half-hearted attempts at criticising the government’s policies and decisions. It was the best he could do to still remain in the news. Dipika was democratic enough in party meetings, which she rarely summoned, listening patiently to all opinions and seldom letting others know of her views. In private, she had begun to realise that none of them could be trusted.

During these gloomy times, she often consulted her younger sister who was as connected to politics as Einstein was to archaeology. Dipika wanted an outsider’s opinion and her sister obliged with scathing comments on the state of affairs in the party. Dipika’s sister was married to a businessman, Frederick Saldanha — Rico for short. A fitness freak, Rico never missed a day at gym, pumping iron for two hours at a stretch.

Besides a well-toned body rippling with bulging muscles, he possessed a sharp mind for business deals that fetched a great amount of easy income. In the years of the Freedom Party’s rule, he had expanded his real estate business by leaps and bounds. Beginning with a seed capital of just Rs.10 lakhs, his firm was now worth Rs.500 crores. He made his money primarily through the sale and purchase of land, leaving the construction part to his partners. He was famous for his hot temper that he often lost in public. When he was once asked about his property deals, he snapped at the enquiring journalist: “Stop it, you &\*-!” He was also known for his open threats and objectionable language.

Rico had tied up with a prominent builder to acquire land in Haryana, which in those days had a Freedom Party government. He coerced farmers to sell theirs at a premium price that was slightly more than the government rate. When some farmers resisted the bid, the government obligingly stepped in and initiated a process to acquire the land under provisions of the local land law, at government rates, ostensibly for the larger public good. Caught between the devil and the deep sea, the reluctant farmers opted for the lesser evil and sold their fertile land to Rico. The state government thereafter cancelled its acquisition process.

But this was only the first stage of the conspiracy. The next step was the conversion of the agricultural land for commercial use. The government once again obliged wholeheartedly. It provided the land use change permission at express speed — in this case, the certification came in less than 48 hours. Rico had turned an expert at utilising power to good measure and the fact that he was the party president’s brother-in-law obviously helped. With the conversion certificate in hand, Rico sold the plots to the builder, making a tidy profit in the process. He had bought the vast tracts of land for less than Rs.7 crores and sold to his partner for over Rs.40 crores.

The builder was happy too. The sale of land had resulted in a giddy hike of real estate prices in the region. As a result, other realty developers started to up their prices too and jumped into the act. This helped the developers to, in turn, sell their properties to homebuyers and retail-owners (shopping malls and other commercial businesses) at rates that were much higher than from just a few months before.

This was not the only dubious deal Rico was involved in. His firm had acquired prime property running into nearly 80 hectares in a city of Rajasthan for less than Rs.75 lakhs. How he managed to acquire it for such a pittance remained a mystery. He sold the property to a land and financial leasing company for ten times that price and pocketed the huge profit.

Even during the Freedom Party’s rule, Rico’s sky-rocketing fortunes had attracted the attention of the investigation agencies. Several farmers had complained of having been short-changed and coerced into selling their land to him. There was no transparency on the profits he had gained through his various buy-sell deeds. The Enforcement Directorate (ED) suspected him of money laundering but could not make any headway during the party’s reign.

When the then opposition, People’s Voice, had launched a tirade against the government and its party’s first family, accusing them of unduly shielding Rico, the Dhillon government had half-heartedly moved to stem the allegation. ED officials summoned him for questioning on a number of occasions, and the Haryana government set up an inquiry panel to probe Rico’s land deals. The ED seemed satisfied by his answers and did not initiate any action thereafter. However, the Haryana panel happened to be headed by an upright senior bureaucrat who found discrepancies and suggested stern action. Action was promptly taken, but not against Rico. The bureaucrat was summarily transferred to some nondescript town.

Having become a multimillionaire in double quick time, Rico had set his sights on another conquest — politics. He had begun to throw hints that if the party chief wished, he was willing to not just enter politics but also contest elections. This had led to a cacophony of demands among the family’s sycophants for his induction. Dipika had resisted the pressure so far, but now she needed someone from within that she could rely upon. Her sister had firmly ruled herself out of politics. She was happy running a chain of boutiques that did extremely well and had a client base that cut across party affiliations. She drew Dipika’s attention to Rico’s interest in politics and suggested that he could be tested.

Dipika had no problems with her brother-in-law. After all, she had worked behind the scenes for ensuring his financial prosperity, and together they had pulled off several ‘money miracles.’ Her problem was the baggage that he would be coming with. The opposition had found in him a handy weapon to attack the party and the family with. It was one thing to deal with charges of corruption against senior party leaders such as Maida, who could be dispensed with, but having to counter accusations against a family member active in politics, was quite another. Until now, she had shrugged off the allegations on the ground that Rico was a private citizen, having nothing to do with the party, and that he was being used as fodder to target her personally. Party spokespersons were directed to drive home this point on TV debates.

Despite Dipika’s reluctance, her sister persisted, pointing out that she needed a reliable hand in these trying times. Besides, once the party returned to power (which, she insisted, was a done deal after the forthcoming elections), these troublesome issues could be effectively taken care of. She added that the more the new government went after him, the more public sympathy it would fetch for Dipika and the party, provided the party chief played her cards well.

Rico’s big day finally arrived. The Freedom Party’s headquarters was decorated with flowers, with its main entrance displaying a new big poster, featuring party president Dipika Sharma and her brother-in-law, Frederick Saldanha. Rico was being referred to as a dynamic and successful individual now taking the plunge into politics with an aim to strengthen the Freedom Party. Inside the party office, the main meeting room had been converted into a mini auditorium, with about a thousand party workers seated on brightly coloured plastic chairs. A dais had been raised, which would seat the party president, a couple of senior party functionaries and the man of the moment, Rico. Former Prime Minister Jagat Dhillon was given a front row seat below. Dipika had not forgotten his betrayal.

A burst of applause broke out as Dipika entered the room, with Rico and the others in her wake. A short speech was delivered by the senior-most functionary, an 80-something treasurer of the party, whose hunched back made it difficult for him to walk. Rico was then given the party membership card, after which Dipika welcomed him into her second ‘family’ and expressed confidence that he would live up to the high expectations they had of him. Dressed in a starched white kurta and pyjama, Rico solemnly let it be known that he was prepared to give up his swanky life for the party’s sake. There was much clapping thereafter and the ceremony concluded. However, some media reporters insisted on Rico taking a few questions.

Dipika was wary. She did not want the occasion to be ruined. Now that her brother-in-law was a party member, he would have to be extra careful with what he said. But rejecting the media’s request could adversely impact the reportage of the occasion. She whispered a few words to Rico, who gamely announced that he would entertain a few questions, “however hard-hitting. I have nothing to hide or be ashamed of.” The press got nothing of news value from him. He maintained a vague innocence, like always, over controversies connected to him.

His parting shot made the headlines for a day, though: “If my rivals cannot prove their allegations, they should shut up.”

In the next 48 hours, the Freedom Party’s working committee met and later announced that “our leader, Frederick Saldanha, has been appointed as the national general secretary of the party” and that he would “soon” contest the Lok Sabha elections. Most political observers and the media speculated that he would be fielded from one of the safe constituencies in the northern states. They were taken by surprise when a party spokesman, addressing the media a few days later, shared that a sitting Member of Parliament representing a Lok Sabha constituency in the southern state of Kerala, would be quitting to vacate his seat for Rico to contest from. It so happened that this particular constituency had a considerable voter base of the Christian community. Kerala was also one of the very few states where the Freedom Party still ruled.

It was by no means a baptism by fire for Rico, though. Not surprisingly, he won with a comfortable margin, with the principal opposition, the Left combine, being only a half-hearted opponent.

The recent developments had sent a clear message within the party and outside that in the new pecking order, Rico came second only to the party president. It would not be long before he would have full control over who could access the party chief. Even senior leaders would have to go through him.

In the meantime, Rico continued to lift weights and also transact questionable land deals.

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## Trouble for the Ultimate Networker

Prime Minister Jadeja had just seen off a Dutch business delegation that was in Delhi to meet with him and explore the possibility of establishing giant power windmills in India. Renewable and clean energy was one of the Prime Minister’s pet projects. He had launched a massive government scheme to provide LPG cylinders to rural Indian households in a passionate attempt to free them from toxic fumes of firewood. Nearly 70 million households had already benefitted from it and the government had scaled up the target to an additional 20 million for the next four months.

But the country was still dependent on coal to fuel its power plants. Nearly 70% of India’s power needs was met by coal. He wanted to significantly reduce this number and was very keen on exploring further possibilities with nuclear and wind energy.

The Dutch were masters of wind energy technology. According to a Global Windmill Report, the Netherlands had generated 4,341 megawatts energy through wind power, and this was only set to increase in the years to come. In contrast, wind power accounted for a little under 10% of the installed power generation capacity in India and even less of the actual power generated. States like Tamil Nadu, Gujarat and Maharashtra had made some strides forward, but far more needed to be done. To take things ahead, the Dutch delegation was scheduled to meet the Union Minister for Renewable Energy, who had already been briefed by the Prime Minister.

His next meeting was with the Finance Minister. PP saw the delegation exit the Prime Minister’s office and spotted a couple of businessmen whom he had met earlier. They told him of the meeting when they greeted him. The Finance Minister was miffed at having been kept out of the loop, as he walked into the Prime Minister’s study. Hasmukh greeted him warmly and updated him on the meeting that he just concluded. “I would have spoken to you about it later, once some progress had been made between the Dutch guys and the energy ministry,” he said by way of explanation, as if reading the minister’s thoughts.

PP had no idea about the agenda of this meeting with the Prime Minister. Hasmukh came straight to the point, as he always did. “Prakash, where are we with the ED’s investigations on Damodaran, Rico and Dalpat Dalvi?” The Enforcement Directorate, as part of the Department of Revenue, came under the jurisdiction of the Finance Ministry.

“The agencies need some more time. These are complex cases, after all…” PP said in a non-committal tone.

“I understand,” the Prime Minister said, “but there has been little progress, and we are nearing the end of our term.”

PP remained silent. Hasmukh continued, “A crackdown on corruption, as you will agree, was one of our chief election planks. People voted us to power on these promises.”

The Finance Minister did not offer any response yet. Hasmukh continued: “Prakash, you know that people trust me and expect me to deliver. We cannot let them down. *You* cannot let me down. I have faith in you.” It didn’t sound like he had much faith, though.

PP finally found his voice. “Hasmukh, I will ask the Enforcement Directorate to speed up the probe.” He addressed the Prime Minister by first name when the two were by themselves; a rare liberty that PP enjoyed.

“Good. We need something to show to the people. An arrest or two would be nice, provided, of course, all legal procedures are duly followed. It’s not as if we are trying to fix these people. They are tainted and the inquiries had begun even during the earlier government’s tenure.”

The Prime Minister was a shrewd observer of people and immediately noticed PP’s discomfort. “Is something bothering you that I should know?”

“Not at all. All’s good and we’ll get cracking soon,” PP said with a quick smile.

The meeting was over.

As PP closed the door behind him, Hasmukh used the intercom and asked his principal secretary to drop in. He told the senior former bureaucrat to call the ED chief in for a meeting at four that evening.

He had other matters to attend to before that, one of them being placating an especially troublesome ally in a politically important state. This regional party in the alliance had a newspaper it brought out. The editorials appearing in it had of late been critical of the Prime Minister’s handling of the Ayodhya Ram temple issue. The publication was baying for the immediate construction of the temple at the disputed site, which was just not possible since the Supreme Court had not yet pronounced verdict on the dispute. Normally, he would have delegated the resolution of the issue to the party president, Kapil. But the alliance party’s chief had insisted on the Prime Minister meeting a delegation of his party and seeing the memorandum that reflected their stand.

An eight-member delegation walked in to see the Prime Minister. Hasmukh spent over 20 minutes with them. The official picture released by the government showed them all cordial and smiling broadly. That was for the camera, of course. In truth, the Prime Minister had given them a dressing down, lecturing them to behave as responsible leaders. He pointed out that they were doing the greatest disservice to the cause of the temple by raising the pitch at a time when a resolution was just around the corner. He added that if the situation demanded, the government would not hesitate to intervene for the sake of the millions of Hindus in the country. The last bit appeared to have pacified the delegation, though they had expected more.

The Prime Minister had made up his mind to ask the party chief to take a tough stand against this particular ally, and if necessary, contest the forthcoming state elections without them. He was confident, as was his state leadership, that the People’s Voice party could get a majority on its own. Nonetheless, Hasmukh did not want to snap the alliance, because it made for bad optics. Unlike his predecessor, Prime Minister Jadeja was a master of brand image management.

The Enforcement Directorate chief walked in precisely at 4 PM. He had a singularly nondescript personality and could have easily passed off as the next-door water purifier salesman. Almost fully greyed and with a generous girth at the hips, he always carried a leather bag slung over his shoulder. It looked like a secret satchel that the media sometimes informally speculated about. In a ‘sensational’ breaking news item on a popular Hindi news channel, the contents of the bag were finally revealed. The ED chief had a penchant for crime thrillers and survived on a staple diet of Daniel Silva and Lee Child. He also swore by the genius of Arthur Conan Doyle and Agatha Christie and considered P D James an “intellectual” author. Most often, he drew out one of these to read from his bag while being driven to work or back home.

“Good evening Sir,” he said and heaved himself into one of the visitor chairs, letting out a sigh, which seemed more like the final burst of a steam engine at the end of its journey. Hasmukh smiled to himself. For many reasons, he liked the man. Not least because the ED honcho, contrary to his physical appearance, had a sharp mind and a hound-like obsession to dig out the last bit of dirt, once he smelled blood.

On a couple of previous occasions, the Prime Minister had suggested that he take up yoga. It was perhaps the only suggestion coming from the Prime Minister that the director of ED politely declined, citing various reasons — all of them either concocted or implausible.

Today was not the time for small talk, though. The Prime Minister had graver issues to discuss. Hasmukh asked him about the progress in the politically sensitive cases and told him that he wanted action soon.

“I’ve already spoken to Prakash. But if you still have any other concerns, you can get in touch directly with my office,” Hasmukh said, offering the ED chief a cup of herbal tea from the tray. The bowl of sugar, he tactfully withdrew out of the burly man’s reach.

Hours later, while the ED chief was driven back to his residence, he did not bury his head in a book, but mused over his conversation with Hasmukh. He had detected in the Prime Minister a trace of impatience and dissatisfaction over the Finance Minister’s functioning on the matter. Instinctively, he knew that a storm was brewing, and it would break out soon.

“Simba, come on buddy!” PP knelt for his pet Doberman. He looked suddenly happy and even boyish, his wife thought. Having come home earlier than usual, he played for a few minutes with his granddaughter too. Thereafter, the Finance Minister retired to his study, and was locked in for hours as always. His wife often joked with him saying that he was so busy that if she were to have an affair, he wouldn’t ever know. He laughed every time she said it. At home too, he appeared very much the composed leader he was in public. But his family guessed (often rightly), that he had several stresses of his own that he couldn’t possibly talk about and left him alone.

The first call PP made was to his predecessor, Maida Damodaran. “Look, Maida, the Prime Minister has given clear instructions that cases against the likes of you ought to be fast-tracked. So, beware.”

Maida asked, “What am I supposed to do?”

“It’s for you to decide.”

“But I have done nothing wrong.”

“Really? What about that LEPE machine scam? And the dozen clearances that the Foreign Investment Promotion Board gave for investments? Clearances that should have first come to the cabinet for approval. The agencies have an eye on your son as well. Didn’t he improperly exploit your position? Are you seriously suggesting that you didn’t know?”

“Nothing has been proved.”

“Not until now. But that will change, if this government wants. If Hasmukh wants.”

“Is this a threat?”

“Consider it a friendly warning.”

“Okay. I’m suitably warned. Thanks.”

PP next called Dalda and delivered a similar message. He had never spoken to Rico before, so he dialled a senior Freedom Party leader and personal friend, instead, and asked him to advise Rico to stay alert. PP didn’t feel any remorse over what he did. He was, after all, standing by his friends. Both Maida and Dalda (when in Delhi) would drop by at his house at least once a month for drinks and gossip. They made for odd company with their funny love-hate friendship.

It was difficult for anyone to fault PP on this count. After all, political differences ought not to impact personal friendships. But what if a minister begins to forewarn his friends, using official information that cannot be shared? There is a red line that cannot be breached, but it had been.

Folks in the Intelligence Bureau who overheard the conversations, thanks to a technology crudely called phone-tapping, were in no doubt that the Finance Minister had committed an act of grave impropriety. A report would land on the Prime Minister’s desk in a week’s time, once the taped conversations were forensically tested at the Central Forensic Science Laboratory in Hyderabad.

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## The Chase

Javed needed to leave India quickly. As he fled from the Prime Minister’s cavalcade, the crowds were thinning and dispersing. Kerala’s main artery, the NH-66, ran parallel to the Arabian Sea for the most part and he wanted to get on the highway. Even as he ran, he kept looking for a reasonably used but sturdy vehicle to escape in and spotted a Tata Indica. No one was around.

He quickly got in, hot-wired the car by removing the plastic around the steering column, stripped the insulation from the battery wires and started the car. He was off in a couple of minutes. The Indica is a small car with easy manoeuvrability and before long he was on the NH-66, blending in with the traffic. In a couple of hours, he had crossed into Malappuram district and reached another safe house, owned by a supporter of Haji Pir Mohammad. Before connecting with him, Javed abandoned the Indica in a mangrove forest across a dirt road stretch and walked back to the highway towards the safe house.

Karan was notified by the police control room that a Tata Indica was missing from the outskirts of Kochi. The licence number along with the description was put out, but by the time it was found, abandoned amidst the mangroves in Malappuram district, four hours had passed. Javed had given them the slip once again. But Karan knew he was closing in. He also knew that Javed’s options were narrowing down, and he would be in Malappuram district, where Haji Pir Mohammad still wielded some influence.

The safe house was situated near the town of Kuttippuram, on the banks of the Bharatapuzha river (River of Bharata.) He was told that he would be able to leave quietly in the night and navigate the river all the way to the Arabian Sea and then switch to a speedboat that would take him to Karachi. The plan looked good on paper, but not when the intelligence and police agencies were hot on his trail. They would first seal the obvious sea route. He began surfing channels on TV to see if there was news of the assassination attempt.

From the spot the stolen car was recovered, Karan drew a circle and knew that Javed was most likely holed up along the Bharatapuzha river. He was confident of cutting off Javed’s access to the Arabian Sea as Bharatapuzha was shallow and passage on a boat would be tricky, what with the water flow having reduced considerably. He had ensured that the attempt on the Prime Minister’s life was kept out of the media, a move made to unsettle Javed and play with his mind. He knew Javed would be scouring the television for news and wanted to ensure that he would only go in the direction that Karan wanted him to.

The meteorological office of Kochi had issued a weather advisory that a fast-moving low-pressure system was moving in from the Arabian Sea. All fishing boats along the Arabian Sea should stay ashore for the next 48 hours. It was picked up by television channels and had left many a fisherman, who looked up at the clear skies, wondering about the forecast. But thanks to the advisory, the waterway along the river was desolate except for the odd cruise boat.

Karan’s team set up camp at Hotel Malabar, along the coast of the river so they could conduct surveillance using drones and stay connected with the coast guard, who was monitoring traffic at the estuary of the river.

Javed realised that the easy escape route had been cut off. The other option was to move along NH-66 and try to get back to the coast a bit higher. But Karan had foreseen that possibility as well and cast a dragnet around Kuttippuram. All access roads into and out of the city were cut off. He drilled in fear of the law (and that of god too) in the local police, extracting details of all Haji Pir Mohammad’s supporters in the area. He then shortlisted those who had residences on the riverbank or close to it. Only one house stood out. Karan had located Javed’s hideout.

Javed saw the weather bulletin and knew that it was a ruse to keep him hemmed in. He also realised that Indian agencies had cut off all his escape routes. Since he had to leave Kochi in a hurry, he was down to his pistol, hunting knife and a round of ammunition. Chances of him giving the slip this time were bleak. Either die or be captured. The second option was more disastrous. He knew too much and could jeopardise the entire spy network of the ISI in India, Nepal and Bangladesh.

He was approximately 20 kilometres away from the sea and if he could somehow hike to the coast, maybe he could wait it out for a ride back home. He would stay put till the night and use his GPS tracker to make the attempt. He couldn’t be holed up for long either.

Karan had instructed for infra-red binoculars to be trained at the safe house. As soon as the group leader saw Javed step out, he used his megaphone and asked the ISI man to freeze and get down on his knees. Javed tried to whip out his pistol to shoot but the sniper was too quick for him. Javed was shot in the right knee and fell down, clutching his leg in pain. The commando team swooped in and overcame Javed, whisking him away in their jeep. The shattered knee would trouble Javed for the rest of his life, especially on cold, wet nights, but that was not Karan’s worry. The man would live to spill his deadly secrets.

Karan and his team returned to Delhi, where Javed was put to interrogation for four days in a row, with hardly a couple of hours’ break. He was a tough man to crack psychologically. Different members of Karan’s team took turns to question him. But in the end, Karan had all the details related to the assassination bid. Javed also gave the name of the ISI point man, Pervez Pasha in Rawalpindi who had assigned him the task. He confirmed the plot of using Ricin and the operations at SRL, as well as his connections with Pir Mohammad.

But there was more coming. Javed had information about the LEPE sale in the Amazon jungles. Although he was not directly linked with the operations there, by virtue of being in India, he had been asked to keep track of the developments. He was also familiar with the ISI man who had contacted Deepak Masani at the Rio airport. This was all a bonus for Karan and his men who managed to extract all related details. While Deepak had been helpful when contacted by the IB, Karan needed to be certain that the IRS official would speak in a court of law when summoned as a witness.

When pressed further, including a (fake) promise of reduced sentence if he cooperated, Javed said he had a picture of the ISI agent who had met Deepak at the airport.

“But how did you get it?” Karan asked.

“Pervez *Bhai* from Rawalpindi had mailed it to me so I could keep tabs on Deepak,” Javed said, looking defeated. He fished out the photograph from his rucksack and handed it over to Karan. It was grainy but recognisable. The IB official could use it to arm-twist Deepak if that was needed.

But the need for that never came. Deepak was, in fact, relieved to have spoken up and to cooperate. What he had not told Karan was that he had taped his conversation with Maida during their meeting. These were things he normally didn’t do. Didn’t have the need to do. But when he had received a message from the then Finance Minister, he did get suspicious. It was not always that the Finance Minister directly dealt with a middle-level officer. He had switched on the recorder of his phone before entering Maida’s office when he had gone to report on the LEPE bid. He was not frisked, thankfully, at the security entrance before being ushered in. Deepak shuddered each time he thought of the outcome if the recorder had been found that day. If Maida were to deny knowing anything about this, the taped conversation would be useful.

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## The Painful Betrayal

Prime Minister Jadeja had a round of discussions with the chiefs of the National Investigation Agency, Central Bureau of Investigation and the Intelligence Bureau. He called them for a joint meeting. Also present was an ‘outsider.’

Govindan Ramaswamy, the maverick economist and self-taught lawyer who had taken on the high and mighty in the previous regime, held a composed smile. The three chiefs were surprised to see him. Although they were aware of his deep intellect and grasp of complex issues (not to mention his proximity with the Prime Minister), they had not imagined he would be asked to attend a sensitive meeting such as this one. But Govindan soon floored them with his humility, expressing gratitude to the Prime Minister for the honour, and was sure that he would learn a great deal simply by hearing these distinguished gentlemen speak. That he too had much to contribute, was something he preferred not to reveal just yet.

Each of the chiefs then proceeded to make an initial presentation of the progress they had made so far. Govindan listened carefully and took copious notes. Forty-five minutes into the meeting, it was clear to the Prime Minister that they had enough material to take decisive action against the heavyweights of the previous regime and its alliance leaders. He had noticed Govindan’s busy fingers with amusement. Hasmukh turned to the agency heads and bluntly asked them about the reasons for delay in action. He expected clear answers.

Mike of the Intelligence Bureau was the first to speak. He detailed the painstaking efforts the bureau had made over several months in gathering information from across the country on the counterfeit currency network, the drugs trade and Love Jihad. Mike also drew links with powerful people including Dalda and Maida. He said the information had been passed on to the relevant probe agencies and added that while interrogations had been conducted along with a few arrests made as well, both Maida and Dalda had so far escaped the dragnet. This was primarily due to lack of cooperation from certain ministries, mostly during the Freedom Party’s rule but also in the current dispensation. Nobody was in doubt that Mike was referring to the Finance Ministry.

The National Investigation Agency head was the next to present his case. He listed the probes his organisation had conducted. He was emphatic that Dalda was neck deep into counterfeit currency and drug trade, while Maida appeared to have played a dubious role in the fake notes business. “It looks like a well-oiled machinery patronised by top guys. A big money game, indeed. And a bigger threat for national security. We must act at once.”

The CBI Director limited much of his presentation to the inquiries his teams had made in the questionable Foreign Investment Promotion Board clearances given when Maida was the Finance Minister, and the LEPE issue. He spoke of the material that the Intelligence Bureau had passed along regarding the surreptitious purchase of the second-hand machine from the grey market and the plans to convert it into a ‘new’ one. He had the Indian Revenue Service officer Deepak Masani’s statement from the IB.

The CBI had made further inquiries and was eventually able to confirm that the machine had served two main purposes. One: Make tidy profits for Maida and a few others. Two: Churn out fake currency, which then made its way to the underground networks run by powerful people. The second, the director pointed out, supplemented the counterfeit notes being pumped into the country’s financial system by Pakistan’s ISI.

After the presentations were done, the Prime Minister asked, “Everything considered, would you gentlemen say that there is sufficient prima facie evidence to take the former Finance Minister and Dalpat Dalvi into custody?” The answer, in unison, was yes. The Prime Minister then cautioned that any ill-considered move would boomerang not just on the credibility of the agencies but the government too.

“We understand that, Sir, but any further delay is not advisable”, Mike answered. The Prime Minister looked towards Govindan, who had stopped writing and listened intently.

Govindan referred to his notes, illegible to all else, and made three immediate observations. One: “How did Javed Bhatti, who spoke no Malayalam, not just converse with the house owner in Kochi but even persuade him on the deal to rent the house? The owner did not speak English or Hindi. Was there a local accomplice?”

His second point was, “Why had the agencies gone slow in investigating the cases of land grabbing involving Rico, even after the government had changed at the centre?”

“Thirdly, why was nothing done about property deals that Dipika Sharma had engaged in regarding the buildings, which a now defunct newspaper owned?”

The agency heads had no answers. None of the three issues had come up for discussion. Govindan explained that all these incidents had connections with money laundering or Love Jihad or counterfeit currency rackets, and of course, the spread of terrorism.

At the very least, the last two issues he had raised pointed to grave corruption in public space. “The CBI and the Enforcement Directorate should have been looking more deeply into the cases,” he said directly to the Prime Minister, adding, “I understand, however, that our own Finance Ministry has slowed us down big time.” The Income Tax Department, for instance, was also involved in Dipika’s property deals, and it had been unable to make much progress because it came under the ministry’s purview.

The Prime Minister remained silent for a couple of minutes, turning over the information in his head. “Go ahead with your respective action plans. If you think the custody of certain persons is essential, then do it. You really never needed my clearance for that. You are free to take whatever steps needed to proceed, within the purview of law, of course.”

The meeting had ended. As the agency heads trooped out, Hasmukh asked Mike and Govindan to stay back. “You have something more to tell, Mike? I had received a request that you wished to speak to me in private.”

“That’s correct, Sir,” Mike answered, glancing at Govindan.

“Please go ahead. You may speak freely in his presence.”

“There is not much to say. Please see this.” He placed a folder on the desk. Hasmukh began to study it, while both Govindan and Mike excused themselves and went out to confabulate. They were called in only ten minutes later. The Prime Minister looked shaken. Govindan also saw pain in his eyes. What information had Mike given him in that file, he wondered.

The folder contained transcripts of telephonic conversations that PP had had with leaders of the Freedom Party, forewarning them about the government crackdown. Despite several cautions from the likes of Govindan, Hasmukh had maintained a soft corner for PP. He could not discount the fact that PP had stood by him in times of crises when he was Chief Minister. He had, of course, come to realise that the war on corruption had been moving at snail’s pace thanks to PP’s ‘loyalty’ towards his friends on the other side of the fence. It was alright to have friends everywhere, but not at the cost of national security. This was not expected of the Finance Minister. *His* Finance Minister. Looking down at the file, he said to himself that this was too grave to be let off.

“I suppose you have the original audio tape, duly cleared by the forensics for veracity?”

“Yes, Sir, in my officer locker,” Mike said.

“Please change the safe’s code the first thing tomorrow.”

“Will do.”

Mike left and as Govindan was about to leave too, the Prime Minister asked him to stay. “Ramaswamy ji, what should I do?”

Ramaswamy had never before seen the Prime Minister in a bind. Hasmukh Jadeja was known for his clear mind and decisive action. Perhaps the question was a rhetorical one. The Prime Minister actually knew what he had to do but was expressing his anguish. A rarity indeed. Govindan had warned the Prime Minister about PP on a few occasions in the past. But today, even as he felt satisfied that PP would finally be brought to book, he felt sad for the Prime Minister. The man would have to deal with a betrayal that turned out to be as personal as it was professional.

After everyone left, Hasmukh took a moment to calm himself. He couldn’t help but recollect several moments from the fond friendship that he’d shared with Prafulla Prakash. It was like being let down by a brother. A few deep breaths settled him down.

The crackdown happened a week later. Maida and Dalda were arrested by the CBI, brought to the court and remanded to judicial custody for 14 days. Meanwhile, both the National Investigation Agency and the Enforcement Directorate moved the courts for the custody of the two accused. Any chance of quick bail at this time was bleak. Eventually, both spent nearly two months in Tihar jail before being granted bail. Their public image lay in tatters. A handful of their supporters still insisted on this being political vendetta, but not many were buying those stories.

The Prime Minister called his closest political and personal associate, the party president, Kapil. There was just one thing to do, Hasmukh said, and it was to seek PP’s resignation. The party chief was asked to convey the message, along with the information that the Prime Minister was in possession of the telephonic conversation records. Hasmukh wanted to spare PP and perhaps himself a painful confrontation.

It was a politically dull weekend and the 24X7 electronic media had reconciled to playing softer stories. Word went around that the Finance Minister would be addressing a press conference in the presence of the People’s Voice president at the party’s swanky new headquarters. Most in the media assumed that the Finance Minister would announce measures to boost the economy or some such.

Once the cameras had been set up, PP appeared on stage and read out from a prepared statement: “In view of my indifferent health — something that you have been aware of, for some time now — I have decided to resign from the Union Council Of Ministers with immediate effect. I thank the Prime Minister for having given me an opportunity to serve the government. I also thank my party president for reposing trust in me, and the millions of party workers who stood by me through all these decades of my political career.”

The press meet ended. No questions were taken from the media.

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## What to do with the grey money?

It had been only two days after their last meeting, and Govindan was called by the Prime Minister one more time. The PMO informed him that two full hours had been slotted for the meeting. Govindan was surprised since the Prime Minister was a busy man and rarely gave such long slots to one-on-one deliberations. What had happened in the last two days that the Prime Minister needed to summon him once more, he wondered.

The maverick academic politician had maintained close bonds with Prime Minister Jadeja for years now, though he never flaunted the friendship in public, unlike several others. But the fact that he was at odds with others who were close to Hasmukh, had affected his political career. He was just a Rajya Sabha member, although many non-partisan commentators and some from the party often said he deserved to be in the Council of Ministers.

He had taught Economics in major international institutions and had served in the government years ago, with some distinction. He often thought out of the box and offered unconventional and effective solutions to boost the country’s economy — suggestions that were unsolicited but sensible. But even though he had been kept out of the cabinet, he had direct access to the Prime Minister.

Govindan could have made the cut, but for PP’s opposition. PP had made it known to the Prime Minister that Govindan was unpredictable (which was true), he was a motormouth (which was false), and that he was a pro-Hindu rabble-rouser (the first bit true, the second, a convenient fabrication.) Besides, he was a litigant in several cases in the apex court, including the Ayodhya Ram temple dispute, and financial impropriety cases that targeted key members of opposition parties. PP argued that a Union Minister could not be seen pursuing private cases. The Prime Minister had conceded but continued to take Govindan’s counsel. Many of his suggestions never got implemented because of stiff resistance from PP and a clutch of other ministers who sided with him.

Govindan had never been the networker that PP was and yet he had contacts with a range of influential people, including those in the media. He used those connections to ensure that his opinions on a variety of contentious issues were duly reflected. It helped that many of his legal initiatives had disrupted the peace for several party rivals. The prevailing perception was that the government usually used Govindan’s shoulder to fire at its opponents. He ventured where the government feared to tread.

Ushered into the Prime Minister’s office, he was pleasantly surprised to see Jagat Dhillon there as well. He shook hands with the former Prime Minister and settled down. Although he had been a critic of the previous government’s policies and actions, Govindan had been careful not to be too harsh on Jagat. He directed his tirade at Dipika and her sycophants for the Dhillon government’s failures. His belligerence was widely accepted; it was an open secret that Jagat Dhillon had been just a proxy, while the real decision-maker was Dipika. Govindan too had labelled Jagat a spineless pawn but changed his views, holding earnest respect, after Jagat’s bold move to dissolve the House. “Better late than never,” was his remark over the former Prime Minister’s turnaround.

The Prime Minister came straight to the point. He looked at his predecessor and said, “Jagat ji, *Ye jo hua, accha nahin hua* (What happened was not okay.) How could you allow thousands of crores of counterfeit currency to enter the country? The RBI is complaining that 113% of the money has returned into the system. Informal estimates point to at least another 10% counterfeit currency presently in circulation. That your ministers had a hand in it, and you could do nothing, is really sad.”

The Prime Minister was mindful with his words, which is why he said, ‘you could do nothing’ instead of ‘you did nothing.’ Jagat remained characteristically impassive and shook his head. “To deter counterfeiting, we have tried everything, from changing the size of notes, to altering the security threads and the denominations even. But the FICN menace continues to flourish. Ramaswamy and you are the economists. What do I do next?”

It was not always that Hasmukh sought the views of his predecessor. In fact, the first time he met former Prime Minister Dhillon after the elections was during his oath taking ceremony. It was seen as a courtesy call by the new Prime Minister and an outreach to the opposition as well. Hasmukh met Jagat several times after that, but only at formal occasions, where the two would always be surrounded by people.

Jagat was quiet for several moments and glanced at Govindan, as if to say he had no suggestions. Govindan cleared his throat and said, “There are ways to get out of this mess. But you must let me see it through. If the bureaucrats are allowed to handle it, they will mess it up; just like they did with demonetisation.”

“What are your suggestions?” the Prime Minister asked.

“First, phase out the Rs.2,000 notes and then the Rs.500 notes. Make Rs.200 as the maximum value denomination. The large volumes of notes will make it difficult to distribute big amounts of money during election time. It would act as a deterrent, to some extent, at least.”

Jagat looked on, not intervening. Govindan continued with his out of the box suggestions.

“Second, abolish personal income tax. I realise that about 30,000 officers in the Income Tax Department would be rendered jobless if that happens. I have a suggestion for that too. Make up the revenue shortfall in other ways, such as raising money through auctions. Instead of taxing income, tax consumption. Indians are prudent and therefore they will save what they don’t spend and that will immensely help the banks, which are facing a severe capital crunch.”

“Hmm,” the Prime Minister said. Jagat continued to look on. It was difficult to ascertain whether his silence was a speechlessness at these unconventional ideas or his usual quiet. Govindan now had the Prime Minister’s full attention.

“Third, work with the United States and get their specialised software for tracking illegal wealth of Indians who keep moving their assets around the world. If you catch the Top 100, attach their assets and bring them back to India; it can act as a powerful deterrent. Most tax havens follow British laws, and so if you can convince the British, you will succeed. Tell the laid-off Income Tax officials that they will get paid 3% of the money that they manage to bring back to the country. They know every loophole that was used to send money abroad and they know every means to bring it back. Let greed work for you.”

The former Prime Minister was shifting in his chair. This was getting too radical for comfort.

“Finally, create a Ministry of Monetisation. All money from abroad will come to the new ministry. It will be this ministry’s mandate to appropriate the money to banks and other financial institutions, under a team that I would be happy to supervise. We must create the financial systems of tomorrow and use new technologies such as Blockchain to ensure that every loan disbursed or collected is tracked, with no loophole for corruption. In about two years, the system will set itself right and you will start witnessing robust growth.”

The Prime Minister looked at Jagat. He expected more than a passive response from this erudite economist. Jagat finally cleared his throat and said that the plan could work, provided clean and honest officials were put on the job. “They must take pride in what they would be doing.”

Hasmukh thought for a few moments. He was happy to finally get Jagat on board. If questions were later asked about the decision, he could always point out that even Jagat Dhillon, a political rival, had supported these measures. The Prime Minister told Govindan, “I will issue the necessary orders to set up an oversight committee headed by you. Since I have taken temporary charge of the Finance Ministry, the process should be completed in a couple of days. You have less than two years to set the ship on the right course — elections are due after that. Give it your best ever shot. If you fail, I’ll take the responsibility; if you succeed, credit will go to you.” The meeting was over.

The mark of a true leader, Govindan said to himself, as he walked out of the Prime Minister’s office.

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## A new relationship?

Mike updated Karan on the conversation he had with the Prime Minister. “Good job, guys,” he said to Karan and Priya, along with the whole team. Now that the hectic scampering/ running around was over, he suggested that Karan and Priya take a few days off before getting on with a new assignment. In private, he also suggested (more like ordered) that Karan take Priya out for dinner at a fancy restaurant – the Intelligence Bureau would finance their date.

Priya was kickboxing at home when she received Karan’s text. She was surprised and amused to be asked out. This was one heart-racing moment involving Karan that had nothing to do with chasing terrorists and crackdown operations, she thought, smiling to herself.

Manch (should it have been named Munch?) was a restaurant tucked away in the basement of a popular five-star hotel. Priya got her hair done and let it hang stylishly down her shoulders. She chose a dark blue, almost black chiffon saree to go with a low-cut sleeveless blouse, a far cry from her nondescript jeans and tees. She had showed up at the restaurant, fashionably late, by 15 minutes. Karan was seated at a table facing the entrance of the restaurant, pondering over life and circling ice cubes in his glass of water. His famous Rubik’s cube was not around.

Used to seeing him in plain shirts and his signature cargo pants with multiple pockets, Priya was as surprised (pleasantly) when she saw Karan. Dressed in a coffee-coloured button down shirt with Khakis and tan moccasins, with a cream-colored sports coat, he had arrived 15 minutes early, with a visit to the florist made in between. So, lying beside him was a bunch of lush lilies (as advised by his mother who was pleased that her son was finally out on a date after his divorce.)

They had both worked long hours for many days under immense pressure. But small talk was turning out to be difficult. Karan finally said, “You look ravishing!” and Priya put on a fake-outraged expression but was pleased that Karan had noticed. “You don’t look too bad yourself,” she said, taking the liberty to banter with him.

The ice broken, they slipped into easy conversation. For once, Priya wasn’t gobbling down her dinner.

Soon enough, they began to lose track of time, getting deeper into each other’s personalities, discovering common interests and intrigued by the differences.

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## The next battle

There was no time to lose. The Prime Minister instructed the Governor of the Reserve Bank of India to phase out the Rs.2000 and Rs.500 denomination notes over the next six months. A tender was floated to purchase software that would track the movement of unaccounted money of Indians lying in various tax havens across the country, in real time. The American firm got the order as it exclusively met the parameters laid down. Part of the deal was to have the software delivered in flat eight months’ time.

The United States had enacted stricter norms for tracking money laundering by establishing a new division called the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC), which monitored rogue regimes, terrorist groups and money laundering by other countries. It thereby tightened the laws around tax havens to make them more accountable. India and the US began co-operating closely to track the menace of black money and the results started to show. The huge corruption machinery could not be ground to a halt overnight, but some breaks were put in place.

The Finance Ministry’s senior bureaucracy was completely revamped with newer people, chosen for their credentials and impeccable integrity, besides their alignment with the government’s vision. The oversight committee headed by Govindan Ramaswamy too was notified and it began to function without delay.

Everybody worked extra hours to implement the changes. But that was the easier part. The more difficult one was the decision on abolishing income tax. The Prime Minister felt that it would be too hasty to do away with personal income tax in one go, an opinion that CK shared. It was, therefore, decided to completely abolish income tax on earnings up to Rs.10 lakhs per annum, and keep the maximum tax at 10%. This in itself was revolutionary for now. Govindan saw the logic in it and concurred.

Meanwhile, probes into the various scams had picked steam. The noose began to tighten further around Maida and Dalda, who had been out on bail. There was no saying when they would be rearrested on other charges as the investigations progressed.

The cumulative impact of the dramatic monetary decisions began to be felt in about a year’s time. The salaried class was ecstatic; it now had more money to spend and save. Demonetisation too had begun to yield results.

Prime Minister Jadeja finally had something concrete to show on the financial front. The already crumbling Freedom Party was further slipping into irrelevance. Since its main agenda was to criticise the policies and decisions of the Jadeja government, it was almost jobless. It could not possibly criticise the move to empower the salaried class or withdraw the high-value currency, especially when the RBI had pumped in enough of the new, smaller notes into the system. Every time a leader of the party went to jail, they kept crying political witch-hunt. But not many were swayed by their crocodile tears anymore. It was a new beginning for the nation, the average age of which was 27 years. Young India was here, clear and confident of what it wanted to achieve.

Meanwhile, another country, in India’s neighbourhood, lurched deeper into anarchy. Yet its intelligence wing plotted away…

*Continued in Book 2 of the Money series…*

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## Where it all began

The Miss World Pageant had promised the world for Preeti Ahuja. She had made it through the various stages of the contest and reached the final. It had been a tough battle, and winning the Miss Femina India contest, which enabled her to participate in the world event, was only the beginning. A lot of sweat, tears, and hard work – watching what to eat and drink, sticking to a rigorous regimen of workouts, and brushing up on her general knowledge had gone into the exercise. Preeti now understood that behind the glamour and public adulation lay years of sacrifice. She had that dazzling smile which won hearts; that perfect body whose every contour had been sensuously accentuated in the tight dress she wore; that measured gait which would be the envy of a nubile deer; and, she had given the most politically correct answers to questions the jury had posed. For instance, when she was asked the tricky question as to how she viewed the Rohingya refugee problem, Preeti had said that both humanitarian and security considerations had to be taken into account by the government before taking a decision.

After all these rigours, she had naturally expected to win. Sadly, for her, it ended with a whimper. She came fourth, and Preeti was gutted. It had been so near and yet so far. Miss Kenya had been crowned the new Miss World, and the other two slots had been taken by Miss Malaysia and Miss Canada. It took weeks for her to get her life back on its axis, as she consoled herself with the thought that there was more to life than winning a beauty contest. She was both pretty and intelligent, shrewd, and ambitious. The world beckoned her, and when she got a scholarship from the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA), Preeti grabbed it with both hands. She had been a good student in school, nearly always coming first; she had also been among the top three in the final school examinations. She enrolled in the Films, Television and Digital Media program of the university. The UCLA had a reputation for being among the best institutions in the US to teach the course, and for Preeti, who nurtured ambitions of a career in films, this was the right opening.

The UCLA campus was beautiful. Nestled in the hills and across the Bel Air Estates and just a few miles from Santa Monica beach, it had some of the best dining halls in the college campuses across the entire United States. The dormitories (dorms for short) are placed at the top of the hills, and there is a steep climbdown to get to the classrooms. People often joked that the geographical placement was one of the reasons that students at the university looked lean and fit. A fitness freak, Preeti loved the trek. One day, while negotiating the steep angles on the staircase, she slipped and fell headlong down. Dawn was just about cracking and not many people were about. As she tumbled, with no means to regain her balance, the quick realisation that she was doomed to god knows what, flashed across her mind. But to her surprise, a pair of huge arms appeared from nowhere and saved her up from further damage.

Steve Langer saw the pretty Indian American take an awkward fall down the steep set of stairs as he was walk-jogging towards the gym. Fit, buffed, and handsome, Steve had the natural chiselled look that one finds often in Hollywood heroes (before they attain stardom, after which the plastic surgeons take charge to ensure its sustenance). As Preeti nestled in his arms, he set her down gently on a flat surface and examined her ankles, which had begun to swell. An ex-Special Forces soldier, who had seen action in Afghanistan, Steve could speak fluent Pashto and hold a conversation in Urdu. While relaxing (if you could call a 4-hour nap break that), he would watch the feel-good musicals of Bollywood and even follow the snappy dialogue that some of them dished out. In the process, he had picked bits and pieces of Hindi as well.

“You don’t want to put weight on your legs. Let me carry you,” Steve gently lifted Preeti and effortlessly took her to the UCLA Urgent Care building.

All Preeti could say amidst the pain she was enduring was “Thanks.”

Steve waited till the attending physician finished examining her. Tendons stretched but no tear and no broken bones. Preeti was fitted with crutches that she was advised to use for at least two weeks till the ankle healed. Steve got his car around to Urgent Care and gave her a ride back to her dorm. Realizing that she would need help getting around, Steve offered to give her a ride to her classes and drop her off thereafter. The solicitations had followed in quick succession and Preeti was somewhat baffled by the concern demonstrated by this stranger. She was also immensely thankful.

In the days that followed, a friendship blossomed without either one realizing it. From being platonic, it graduated to a physical one, with Preeti spending increasingly longer times at Steve’s pad, a single-occupancy dorm. There was an easy elegance about Steve that Preeti liked. Over time, the two opened out to each other, speaking about their lives, ambitions, career dreams, families. While Preeti was impressed by Steve’s stint as a soldier, he in turn was gob smacked by the realisation that a would-be film star had taken a liking to him. At that moment, both knew nothing about how long their affair would last, though they must have wished it would be for forever.