

## “For God’s Sake, Be Objective!”

SOMNATH BATABYAL

Journalists write for each other. Their readers are not involved in this process. As I sat, sipped tea and smoked cigarettes as a cub reporter at the police headquarters pressroom at ITO in New Delhi in the mid-1990s, this was one of my first realisations about my chosen profession.

Each afternoon, crime reporters from all the various local newspapers (English, Hindi and Urdu) would collect at the office of Mr Ravi Pawar, the police PRO (Public Relations Officer). Pawar *sahib* is a generous host, and tea and cigarettes would never be in short supply. The routine was always the same. If there was nothing much happening, i.e., no old couples murdered, children kidnapped or a devastating fire burning down houses, we would sit together discussing the papers and various reports, and wait for the bomb to go off somewhere.

The journalist who had managed to get one more detail on the South Delhi murder of the previous day – that the wife received a phone call before she was brutally hacked by her assailants – got to gloat for the day. The reporters who hadn’t managed to get this piece of ‘vital information’ were suitably chastened, knowing they would have to face the wrath of their chief reporters later. “Shithead, why didn’t you get the fact that there was a phone call before the murder? Stop spending time at the Press Club. Who are your sources? Get your ass to office”. And if he<sup>1</sup> had completely missed the story, then heaven forbid, the wrath might come from the newspaper editor!

Why were we so obsessed with detail? Most readers do not compare reports in different newspapers, they’re not bothered how many calls a victim received; they just want to know the bare facts, sometimes not even those. Who, then, were we writing for? The answer is, for ourselves; our self-esteem; to prove our claim to other crime reporters that we have better sources, better contacts; and last but not the least, to ensure that we have job offers in hand. It was the chief reporter of the rival paper, the metro editor, whose eye we wanted to catch. No reader, however loyal to my paper, can make me a job offer. So the journalist fraternity was our audience. Beyond that, we didn’t care.

In this game, the police officers who were our main sources, walked a very thin line. If the Deputy Commissioner of Police (say North Delhi) gave me a story as a reporter in *The Pioneer*, then he risked offending the gentleman from *The Hindustan Times* or *The Times*

of India. The trick was to become such good friends with the police officers that they would not be bothered about what other journalists said, and continue to give you stories anyway. My drinking capacity, and the state of my lungs and liver, speak for the nights spent in police stations with constables and all levels of police officers, and how devoted I was to building those contacts.

The class divide was easily visible in the mechanics of this process. The journalists from the Hindi papers were far more acquainted with the beat constables. They could speak cop language, and at times managed to drink more than their counterparts from the English papers. We, restricted by our missionary-school education, managed to reach out mostly to the senior officers. These officers, burdened with the responsibility of what appeared in the press, not only manipulated but also actively guarded information. The Hindi journalists almost always scored over us with lower level policemen passing on information to them, sometimes just to spite their senior officers.

It didn't really matter though. We were paid more, and had social prestige. In fact, we had our own sources amongst the Hindi journalists; they would share their stories with us in exchange for a decent dinner at the club, or sometimes much less.

All that has changed now. Television journalism, the boom of Hindi and other regional channels in news broadcasting, has ensured the emergence of a more level playing ground. The journalist from the English papers suddenly finds himself (and increasingly, these days, herself), at a disadvantage. Their colleague who speaks the local language gets more money and more job offers. The smugness of the English-speaking elite journalist has been destroyed. The slower pace, the afternoons spent drinking tea, hours over a quiet lunch, are no longer a reality. A new professionalism has been established through the format of 24-hour news. To be on the ball, always, 24/7, is the new mantra.

But with this boom in television channels, and the consequent proliferation of crime shows, another fundamental change has taken place. In their bid to deliver stories, crime reporters today are forced to bring out, on prime time television, reports that would not get a mention on the third page of the dailies. Radhika Roy, managing director of the immensely successful NDTV, recently told me that there was enormous pressure to add more crime shows because of the high TRP ratings these shows command.

So, press conferences which earlier would be attended by a dozen journalists have now turned into mega-affairs of over 100 television cameras, cameramen, their assistants and of course the reporters themselves. Officers who would have thought themselves lucky to get their photo in the newspapers are now assured of sound-bytes, and are becoming more camera savvy. Even the most mundane affairs are highly publicised. Pawar *sahib*, despite a recent heart attack, has become busier, his tea bills shooting up every day.

This is not nostalgic writing about the good old days. I have worked both in the print and the television industry, and can assure you that both have their advantages. The glamour and generous salaries of television compensated for the higher work pressure. A flight upgrade, a discount in restaurant bills, became more commonplace.

But is anything achieved by such increased coverage of crime, violence and bloodshed? I will not attempt to describe the effects of television on audiences. People better qualified than I, for instance media analysts and sociologists, have tried; and still no one has come

up with anything remotely comprehensive or satisfying. Repeats, however, definitely bore readers and audiences. This is the very reason even a disaster like the December 2004 tsunami in South Asia, or the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Centre, have a finite life span in the ever-changing world of daily news. Audiences hunger for the new; and despite the continuous fascination for crime, an overdose makes one immune to the horror that lies behind each death, murder, rape. These become mere statistics. Extraordinary violence becomes mundane, and loses its edge.

To overcome this, television anchors find more innovative ways to present their stories: better graphics, sound effects. Even the anchors change, in order to keep things 'new.' In my personal experience, the television camera has definitely taken away the investigative edge of crime reporting. The need for a sound-byte, and to have officials on camera, means that undercover operations are limited. The camera, much as it captures, is more important in what it is *not* allowed to capture. Policemen who were earlier candid in their statements and free with their opinions are now tight-lipped, and rehearse what they should say in front of the omnipresent lens. In short, a crime reporter's life has become less interesting. The days of sleuthing are over; a cameraman and an assistant, the weight of equipment and the pressure have replaced the pleasure of working and remaining incognito. This is not to discount what the spycam has managed to unveil, but episodes such as the Tehelka expose on the armed forces in 2000 are few indeed.

Besides the obvious problems of the camera and getting everything on record, the other thing that restricts investigative journalism on television is time. Most producers allow a minute-and-a-half to two minutes for a story. If it is longer, stories are frequently dropped. A regular story is meant have two sound-bytes, say of 15 seconds each, and then the journalist's piece-to-camera will be around the same length. That makes it 45 seconds, and s/he then has merely another 45 seconds to display investigative skills. No wonder most stories barely scratch the surface. Senior correspondents who carry weight in the organisation and can push through longer stories hardly ever report on crime, having long since graduated to covering politics.

Space is obviously a problem in print too. Many hours have been spent battling with sub-editors who would want to chop my exclusive which I believed was worth shouting "Stop the press!" for, to a single column on the fifth page.

Here, however, I will tell the story of what goes on behind the scenes: that which we could never write because of space or because of a commitment to silence. Any good reporter never writes more than one-fourth of what is in his diary. Here then is the other three-fourths. My focus here in these stories is the crime reporter, the 21-year-old straight out of college, the lowest in the pecking order, always the most overworked, most in demand and least paid. Excitement, you will see, made up for everything else. Uneasy sleep, tormented memories were the price.

### **A Kidnapping, a Rescue and Other Stories**

Deepak Mishra, then Deputy Commissioner of Police (West Delhi) was an officer known to every crime reporter. You could like him or hate him, but you had to know him. He was the Dirty Harry of the Delhi Police; he had the maximum shootouts to his credit and boasted of

a crack team in which the members knew which way to point a gun. Deepak knew his job, was proud of his work, and arrogant. Imagine his chagrin when one afternoon, sitting in his office and drinking his tea, a young reporter who barely knew the ropes accused him of staging an encounter. I did not know then that encounters were mostly always fake, and this was a fact not to be mentioned; if spoken about, it could only be in unofficial tones, a shared secret between you and a policeman who has crossed the professional boundary and become a friend.

Deepak was not a friend, at least not then (and if he reads this, he might not remain one). I had heard from some sources that one of his recent operations had not been as genuine as the papers made it out to be. “*Arre saala*”, the man roared, “you call me a fake, you who have not yet lost your milk teeth?” Deepak liked to always point out the difference in our ages. Young crime reporters who did not know their business irritated him, and he was quick to offer a crash course. This evening I was to be his student and subject. I was to embark on a real life cop-and-kidnapper story, be a part of it.

“Do you want to see how Deepak Mishra operates?” he continued. I, still somewhat confused, uttered a feeble “Yes”. “Fine”, he said from behind his huge desk, lighting another cigarette. “You are going tonight on a rescue mission with my team. Go and see how we do things and then call me a fake...And not a word to anyone”, he added, with a slight grin on his face.

A high school student had been kidnapped from the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) recently. His father, a wealthy shop owner in Karol Bagh, had been asked for ransom of half-a-million rupees.<sup>2</sup> As is the routine, the parents had been told not to contact the police, or risk losing their son. As in most cases, the parents had.

The kidnappers had asked the father to come to a hotel in Meerut. The money was to be left with the hotel manager and the father was to leave immediately for Delhi. The son would be returned soon, the caller had promised.

It was 2 pm. The father and uncle of the kidnapped boy arrived at Mishra’s office. One by one, members of the police team, which was to be a part of the rescue mission, filed in. I knew Sanjay Singh, deputy to Mishra and in charge of this operation. A young IPS officer, upright and honest, he had already gained a reputation. With him was the Assistant Commissioner of Police L. N. Rao, a veteran of several shootouts, and the now famous ACP Rajbir Singh, still in the process of becoming a police sharpshooter, itching to go for his gun.

There were others, including a few policewomen. The plan was quickly laid out, Deepak left Sanjay to do most of the talking, interrupting only when necessary. The boy’s father and uncle would drive first to Meerut, go to the designated hotel, leave the money and come back. But before this, a police team in plain clothes would have done a reconnaissance of the hotel and surrounded it. After the parents left, three teams of two, a male and a female cop, posing as couples, would check into the hotel. We would wait for the kidnapper to come, then either nab him or shoot him if necessary. For this, another team of seasoned cops and a naïve reporter would be sent.

The teams left quickly: first the reconnaissance team, then the father and uncle, then the supposed couples, and then the seniors. Our team left at 4 pm. I was sitting with Rao, who found it hugely funny to have me with him; he would mention to the driver, “*Arre yaar*,

*bulletproof jacket nahin laye. Kuch ho na jaaye* (Damn it, we haven't brought bulletproof jackets. Hope nothing happens)". Then on the wireless to Mishra, he mentioned that three years ago, on this day he had been shot in the stomach in an encounter. To me, the jokes seemed tasteless.

We entered Meerut an hour later. The sun had gone down, and the winter chill was pronounced. The hotel was on the right, just as one entered the city. As we drove past it, I saw our team members trying to merge with the surroundings, some buying cigarettes, others drinking tea. They were either alone or in twos. They had informed us on the wireless that it was not an ideal place for a shootout; this was indeed the case. The hotel was in a teeming market. I seemed to be the only one happy about this.



Our car drove past the hotel before Rao asked the driver to stop. We got out. Rao walked off, leaving me with two other cops. A smoke seemed the only possible activity at that moment, so all of us lit up. Rao walked back a few minutes later to tell us that the father and uncle, having deposited the money, had proceeded towards Delhi. The 'couples' had checked in. Between ourselves we quickly reached the conclusion that the hotel manager and probably the staff was complicit in the kidnapping.

A few minutes later the drama started unfolding. A posse of uniformed Meerut policemen stormed into the hotel. We must have been 300 metres away. Rao was the first

to react. For a man his size, it was remarkable how quickly he made it to the hotel. We followed at his heels. By the time we reached it, Sanjay Singh had already taken control. The Meerut policemen were listening to him when we barged in. He silenced us with the wave of his hand.

Our assumptions regarding the hotel manager and his staff were proved wrong. The father and uncle had given the money to the manager. The money, Rs. 5,00,000 in cash, was wrapped in newspaper and put in a plastic shopping bag. The manager had been informed by someone who had booked a room by phone a day earlier, that a bag would be delivered for him. He was to keep the bag in the room reserved for him and it would be picked up the following day. The manager duly received the bag filled with money from the



father, and kept it under his desk.

Then things began to deviate from the script. The three 'couples' checked in too soon after one another. The manager got suspicious. He checked the bag and saw the cash. He panicked and called the police.

Sanjay wanted the uniformed men off the grounds, and fast. The kidnapper might have been watching, and that would mean the boy would be at risk. The Meerut policemen disappeared. The Delhi policemen and women were called in for a quick briefing. All the hotel staff was called in. The plan had to be reformulated. By now it was evident to Sanjay

Singh that the hotel staff were not involved. He chose to tell them the entire story, warning them that no one was leaving the premises for the night. The kidnapper, according to the manager, was to come the next morning. We were to turn in for the night. Part of the team would keep watch, just in case.

I shared the room with Sanjay, Rs. 5 lakhs and some pistols. We slept fitfully. Sanjay was already up when I woke, and my first sight of the morning was of him loading his revolver. "I know it's going to happen today. *Mujhe lag raha hai* (I have a feeling)", he said.

I did not care to ask him what was going to happen. The room Sanjay and I had chosen was directly opposite the one booked by the kidnapper. We quickly placed the money in the room. It was 7 am. After a hurried breakfast, Sanjay went down to talk to his men. I was told to stay in the room, keep my eyes glued to the keyhole, and watch the room opposite.

The hours stretched slowly, almost maddeningly. Every sound, every little movement seemed magnified during those few hours. I must have dozed off for a bit. My eyes opened when, at around 11 am, the phone in the room rang. It was Sanjay, his voice hushed and urgent. "Som, the chap is here. *Usey saman leno de* (Let him take the stuff). He is just the driver. The kidnapper is still not here". Sanjay need not have bothered cautioning me not to get into action. I was not planning on it. I saw the man go into the room and then leave with the bag. Moments later Sanjay called, asking me to come to the reception downstairs. By the time I reached, the man had gone. Sanjay told me that the man who had come to collect the bag was probably a taxi driver, and that the Delhi team was on his tail. He asked me to stay back with a couple of policemen while he went off on the chase.

It was depressing, to have been part of the action and then to be told to keep out. It was almost noon and as we had nothing to do, we ordered lunch. As far as I was concerned, this game was over.

Two hours later, a man walked in asking for me. "*Sanjay Singh sahib bula rahen hain* (Sanjay Singh *sahib* is calling you)". I left with him, got into the car. As we drove off, I was struck by an irrational fear. Who was this man? I didn't remember him as one of us, as part of the Delhi team.

I kept quiet. We stopped at the main market, a 20-minute drive from the hotel. Sanjay was there, showing an unusual amount of interest in the local pottery. He kept walking and I fell in, a step behind. He started talking to me in an undertone while pretending to look around. He said that he was pulling his men back. The kidnapper still had not showed up. The car and the driver were waiting. Sanjay felt that the kidnapper might have sensed there were policemen around. "We all look like policemen. You don't. Stay near the car. Not too close. If the man turns up, use this to call us", he said giving me his wireless set.

I had no time to react. Sanjay had already moved off. I walked towards the car. The driver was inside, dozing. A bus stop was right next to it, a good place to wait while I kept watch. An hour later, a few more cigarette butts lay scattered near my feet. I was getting bored. Damn, since yesterday evening, everything seemed to be one long wait.

He showed up suddenly. Over six feet tall, broadly built, with a handsome face and close-cropped hair, green shirt and jeans, he opened the car door on the passenger side and got inside. The driver woke and I saw them talk for a minute before they started the car and left. Panicking, I ran into a phone booth and radioed Sanjay. He said he was on his

way. I had barely stepped out of the booth when Rao and his men drove up in a white Maruti van. They pulled me in. The driver easily caught up with the taxi, an Ambassador. We followed it.

After driving around for about 15 minutes, the taxi turned around and drove again towards the market. Rao lost his patience. We had been advised not to go for the man. We still did not know where the boy was. But Rao was having none of it, muttering under his breath, "*Behenchod...char raat se nahin soya. Isko to abhi lena hain* (The sister-fucker...I haven't slept for four nights. I will take him now)". His driver and men knew their drill like clockwork. The taxi had pulled up again at the market and the man and his driver were each having a fruit juice. Our van, engine switched off, rolled up to them silently.

I can still recollect in entirety each detail of the next five violent seconds. As the car came up, Rao slid the door open. His giant hand reached out, lifted the man up and into the van, on the floor. The door was pulled shut and the van sped away. There was no time to be lost. The man was questioned, swiftly, efficiently. He told us that the kidnapped boy was in Ghaziabad. I was dropped off to tell Sanjay Singh what had happened, while Rao and his men sped towards Ghaziabad. Sanjay was a bit bewildered. He had no clue as to what had happened, and he was supposed to be leading the team. I filled him in on the events as we too rushed towards Ghaziabad in his car. Somewhere along the way, Rao radioed to tell us that he had reached the town and rescued the boy. Sanjay relaxed visibly. The job was done.

I got to meet the boy almost immediately after the rescue. A first-hand account of what happened, how he was kidnapped, what he went through – it made a good story. The kidnapers (there were two)<sup>3</sup> were ordinary middle-class men, out to make a quick buck. The story of the rescue, however, how it was planned and its execution, remained untold. Deepak Mishra did not want every reporter to know, and as he put it, "*Sab mere peeche pad jaayenge. Agli baar sabko le jaana padega* (Everyone will be after me. Everyone will have to be taken along, the next time)".

I came back to Delhi jubilant. So this was going to be my life. Real-life chases, adventures, great stories. That myth was quickly dispelled. Over the next few years of reporting, I saw enough dead bodies to last me a few lifetimes. The Orissa cyclone, the tragic collision of the two planes over Haryana, the Rajdhani accident, these were events of gigantic proportions.

But it is the supposedly smaller ones – the particularly brutal murder, the somehow unnecessary violence – which haunt my mind. In 1998 I was working for *The Week*. I had moved on from regular crime reporting onto higher things. There was a spate of murders and dacoities in the city that year, and my boss asked me to have a look. It was interesting to get back to something I knew, and had enjoyed. A day after I was handed the assignment, an assault took place in the East Delhi locality of Mayur Vihar.

I visited the flat where an intruder had entered pretending to be a delivery boy. The lady of the house was alone with her one-year-old girl. The man had tied up the woman, ransacked the house and taken most of the valuables. While leaving he saw the child, who at the time of the incident was being given a bath in the tub. She had two plain gold earrings on. The man tried to pull them off. The child screamed. He drowned her in the bathwater to stop her screaming, while the mother looked on. I had to ask her how she felt. The next

day, the then-Police Commissioner V. N. Singh said to me, “Som, tell us, what kind of a society do we police? How can someone kill a child for earrings?”

In 1995, a Delhi Public School bus had an accident. Only one child was killed. I was sent to interview the mother. She kept asking me why it had to be her son. The younger brother of the dead boy wanted me to play cricket with him so he wouldn't miss his brother.

One of my first outstation assignments was to cover a fire that had broken out in a firecracker factory in Haryana. I saw children with 100% burns, writhing in makeshift hospital beds. Every inch of their body had been burnt, even their eyelids. They were from Sivakasi in south India, poor children who had been sent north by parents who needed the money. I filed a report which my chief reporter found excellent. He said I should have taken the byline for it. When I told him it did not matter, when I told him again of what I saw, he remarked that by the end of the year, I would stop feeling anything. And by the time the Rajdhani train accident occurred in Bihar in 2002, and I was in television, I was counting the bodies. More bodies meant more prime time. I was on air for two whole days, a reporter's dream.

### NOTES

1. It is not that I am gender insensitive. Crime reporting till a few years earlier (and to a large extent today) was a male-dominated world.
2. This was 1995. Rs. 5,00,000 was a huge sum. For most of us, it probably still is.
3. The second kidnapper surrendered in court two days after his accomplice was arrested.