

## A Brain Itch

From the Files of Vish Puri, India's "Most Private Investigator".

by Tarquin Hall

The photographs laid out on Vish Puri's desk in his New Delhi office told an especially mundane story. Jagdu Shaha, 27, had driven his red Maruti along the Expressway to the steel and glass office block that housed the call centre where he worked as a senior manager. Lunch had consisted of aloo vada served on a tobacco leaf plate at a dusty, roadside dhabba. He'd enjoyed a cup of milky chai and a friendly chat with the stand's owner before spending another four hours monitoring calls from customers with challenging accents in places like Glasgow.

"En route to his home, Shaha stopped to do some shopping, Boss," explained Puri's undercover operative, whose nickname was "Tubelight".

Shaha's evening had proven equally uneventful. The listening devices now hidden about his flat – standard practice these days during any matrimonial investigation – had monitored him watching TV, talking with his parents on the phone and surfing the internet. Late at night, he'd also cooked himself a large meal.

"He does cooking himself?" asked Puri as he adjusted the belt around his large, middle-aged tummy. He sounded surprised. "There's no maid?"

Tubelight gave a shrug. Granted this was unusual behaviour for a single Indian male from the so-called "creamy layer" of society, but hardly a crime.

"Why he's not living with his parents?" was the private detective's next question.

"They're still in Gujarat. He shifted here alone six months back."

Puri gave a nod. Such breaks with tradition were happening more and more amongst the Indian middle classes – sons moving away from the folds of their immediate families, daughters going out at night with no elder to chaperone them. It often led to problems. Increasingly, young people were "going in for" affairs as Puri put it.

"What all he looked at on his computer?" he asked.

Tubelight read from Shaha's web search record. He'd got hold of it for a few hundred rupees from a contact at the internet service provider. "Stock market, chat room, Bollywood gossip."

"No naughty pictures?" Puri sounded almost disappointed.

"Believe me, Boss, we've been doing round the clock surveillance."

The detective went thoughtfully quiet, casting his eyes over the photographs again. He was suffering from what he called a "brain itch" – the

feeling that he had somehow overlooked something. Before he could give Shaha a clean bill of health, Puri had to be absolutely sure he was squeaky clean. His clients, Mr. and Mrs. Patni, were from a well-respected, Delhi-based Bania family, after all. They were followers of Jainism, an Indian religion that prescribed a path of non-violence to all living things, and were extremely conservative. As for their daughter, Devi, she was, according to the prominent matrimonial advertisement the family had placed in the choicest Indian newspapers, “fair, beautiful, homely, family orientated and educated, having a degree in Business Management.”

The criteria for potential grooms had therefore been extraordinary strict. Caste, wealth, looks, connections, as well as family status, reputation and character – all had been factors. The fact that Shaha ticked all the boxes was a minor miracle. His family were drawn from the Bania caste; he had attended a good university and was seeking an educated wife but one who would make home life her first priority. His parents, too, had the right pedigree, Shaha's father being a successful spice trader from the city of Ahmedabad.

But before the dowry could be handed over, before the Patni's shelled out God knows how much for a ridiculously lavish wedding (the plan being that it should be held at a Rajasthani fort-palace), they had taken the precaution of hiring Most Private Investigators Ltd., Puri's firm, to check that Shaha had no hidden secrets.

The case had been given “taap” priority. For four days now, Puri's team of operatives had been on the job. Bank records, credit card records, phone records – everything had been scrutinised.

“You got hold of his university degree?” Puri asked Tubelight.

“Yes, Boss, it checks out.”

“No special deliveries – like drugs and all?”

A shake of the head.

“You did garbage analysis?”

“Of course, Boss. Every day. Nothing. I even got hold of the bag he dumped by the roadside.”

Puri's ears pricked up. “What bag exactly? Tell me.”

“This morning Boss, on his way to work, he dropped a plastic bag out the window. I stopped and picked it up.”

“And?”

“Just some bones inside, Boss.”

Puri's tone was urgent. “What type of bones?”

“Mutton I think. They'd been chewed on.”

“And yesterday you said he went shopping, correct? He bought some

meat is it?"

"He went inside one of those fancy new stores. I couldn't follow him inside."

Puri was searching hurriedly through the photographs on his desk. He found the one of Shaha emerging from the supermarket and reached for his magnifying glass. There was a sticker on the side of his plastic carry bag. He could make out the words.

"There it is! One kilo mutton!" he exclaimed.

Tubelight looked unmoved. "So what, Boss?"

"Shaha claims to be a strict vegetarian, no? Not even eggs he is supposed to eat. The Patnis have been most specific on this requirement. Such types believe eating meat will pollute them. But evidently he is consuming mutton in secret. That is why he is cooking late at night!"

"It was two in the morning and he opened all the windows," confirmed the operative.

"So his neighbours don't come to know. His is an apartment block for veg residents after all."

Puri leaned back in his chair and breathed a sigh of relief.

"Thank the God we caught him at it," he said. "Just imagine if Mr and Mrs Patni had found out about his habit after marriage? They would blame me, only, and thus my reputation would lie in tatters. Such a lot of responsibility is on my head these days I tell you."